

SEAN WILLSON



DROWNING
EARTH

Drowning Earth

Portalverse: Elemental Origins
Book 1

Sean Willson



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Contents

Welcome to Drowning Earth

About this Book

Prologue

Act I

1. The Tempest

2. Bull Nuke

3. Supercavitating

4. The Brig

Interlude

5. Waffles

6. Dive, Dive, Dive!

7. Doubt and Debris

8. Hidey-Hole

9. Traitor

Interlude

10. Boiling the Ocean

11. Sonar Fishing

12. It's the Hope that Kills You

13. Yankee Doodle

Interlude

Act II

14. The Hatch

15. Speaking in Tongues

16. Rank Does Not Confer Trust

17. Keys to the Castle

18. The Smell of Burning Flesh

Interlude

19. Like a Cat Up a Tree

20. Gunny Sacks

21. Lotion

22. Breaking Point

23. Dot to Dot

Interlude

24. Fresh Wounds

25. Tie Breaker

26. From Ear to Ear

27. Lifeline

Interlude

Act III

28. Soul-Crushing Depth

29. Waiting for Death

30. One Mind, One Purpose

Interlude

31. Whack-a-Mole

32. Flash of Light

33. Death's Evil Grin

34. Full Circle

Interlude

Act IV

35. Lifemarks

36. Body Bag

37. Cornucopia of Relics

38. From Mars, With Blood

Thank you for reading!

Also by Sean Willson

About the Author

Acknowledgements

WELCOME TO DROWNING EARTH

Start Reading

About this Book

About the Author

Copyright Page

Thank you for delving into this chronicle!

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PORTALVERSE

ELEMENTAL ORIGINS SERIES

Novella: Martian Tide (FREE)

Book 1: Drowning Earth (This book)

Book 2: Dead in the Water

Book 3: Gasping for Air

Book 4: Trial by Fire

About this Book

Her sub can break the underwater speed of sound. But can she outpace the threat of nuclear winter?

In 2055, with global tensions nearing the breaking point, humanity teeters on the brink of annihilation. Their only hope lies with Captain Kel Williams and her loyal team, crewing what some call the deadliest submarine ever built.

Kel races to stake a claim to valuable undersea biomass—a lifeline that could prolong humanity's demise. But deadly Russo-Chinese factions lurk in the lightless depths, determined to stop her at every turn.

Besieged by threats within and without, Kel finds herself walking a razor's edge to maintain control. Surrounded on all sides, she relies on her crew's dedication and her Bull Nuke Oscar Allen to maintain order and avert disaster.

Yet unbeknownst to all, salvation may lie in secrets lurking deep beneath the waves. Hidden truths once dismissed as myth. Whispers of impossible doorways and gods long forgotten.

With danger at every turn, will anyone escape the deadly snare, or do ancient myths hold the key to humanity's survival?

Prologue

The Builders

W

illow's fingers wove reality in the chaos with precise deliberation, willow's fingers wove reality in the chaos with precise. Unearthly colors danced at the periphery of perception, signaling an intrusion as inevitable as it was unforeseen. Her kin, a fellow god, a Builder, had infiltrated her sanctuary. Their presence alone bore the potential to unravel her mission and the thread of hope humanity clung to.

"It's clear my prior counsel was dismissed." Helios conjured a male human form to house his consciousness and plucked the globe of Earth from Willow's aethereal sheath. "I really shouldn't be surprised—I guess— considering the depth of your fixation with this dimensional construct." He slowly turned the green-blue sphere over in his hand.

"Give me that!" She snatched the planet from his grasp and dropped it back in place. With a twist of a hand, she reset time to before the interruption—a simple feat, and one that would slow Helios down should he choose to vex her world.

The wave of déjà vu would take days to propagate through the world, despite the breach having lasted only a moment. This splinter dimension was still sustainable, unlike during Helios's last visit. Once a century was more than enough for her, and unless she'd failed, humanity shouldn't have to deal with a plague this time around.

Willow raised her arms and gestured, wrapping the dimension in

a protective sheath. It was a technique she'd developed long ago to prevent other Builders from interfering with her experiments.

There was a time in the past when several of them broke in and toyed with her creations. They had physically materialized in her worlds and demanded patronage and sacrifices, which had in turn led to generations of human bloodshed and war. Some of them had even torn her lineage tree apart, attempting to mix their Builder genes with those of humans.

While she wasn't against changing things up to diversify the dimensions, she never messed around with Builder genetics. Introducing their mutant deviations to the pool was too much. She wanted something new: something worthy of her replacement.

The thought was sacrilege in her normal plane of existence, but here in her personal workspace, she could do anything she desired—well, except for successfully locking out her family, it seemed.

“Go away, Helios. I don't have time for your antics.” She closed her virtual eyelids and willed him elsewhere, but nothing happened. He was too strong for her, and she needed time for her dimensional defenses to get a fix on his aura. A growl escaped her lips as she opened her eyes and glared at him.

“You almost had it. A few more tries and, like your humans, you might have something.” Helios turned his attention to the glowing sphere floating in front of them. “Tell me something—” He reached forward to pluck at the globe again and yanked his hand back, shaking it in pain and sending sparks of white in every direction. He stared at his appendage, seeming to relish the feeling. It wasn't often a Builder felt anything.

She'd learned part of that effect by studying Hera. After years of hiding in the shadows of her kind, Willow finally had someone who supported her ascension.

He clasped his hands together and peered at her. “Do they even know how naïve they are? I mean, in nearly every dimensional fragment, they destroy their home, be it through toxins, war, or overpopulation. This species you're infatuated with is flawed.” He

paused and brought his hands swiftly apart, zooming their vantage into the planetary globe. “Look at them. Even in this pitiful fragment, they’ve ravaged their surfaces above ground, and now they’re killing their oceans beneath the waves.” He chuckled. “Poseidon would have their hides.”

“Well, this isn’t his dimension; it’s mine. Please leave!” She tweaked the lingering rupture he’d arrived through but failed to close it. Someone must be on the other side holding it open.

“Aww... Is that any way to treat family?” He lowered his gaze at her and patted the air beside him, summoning a bench to his right. “Let’s watch this fragment together. I’m genuinely interested in what you see in these mortals.”

She sighed—a gesture she’d learned from the humans in her experiments. While her siblings had long ago grown weary of refining their emotions along with their Builder craft, she had not.

Willow floated up beside him and sank onto the simple furnishing. While she appreciated the Builders’ nuanced mannerisms, their decorations lacked finesse. That was one of the many things she loved about the human mind: it created breathtaking sparks of innovation and artistry. As she ran her hand over the cold, metallic bench, her heart sank. Its perfect surface screamed for a flaw, something most Builders never appreciated.

“So, tell me...” He slid forward on the edge of the bench and leaned toward the globe. Its fragility contrasted against the aether. “What do you see in this pale blue dot of yours? Help me look past the wild climatic events caused by this species’ stupidity, the poisoning of their world, or the rolling blackouts that bring them to their knees. And don’t even get me started on their willingness to accept the worst forms of themselves as leaders. What is it within them that infatuates you so?”

“How about you just watch?” Willow said, rolling her hand over the globe. She searched for an example to pluck from the depths of humanity and then saw it: the patch of colorful, glowing life signs she’d been watching so intently in this fragment. There were so

many with such concentrated potential in a tiny space. To this day, she couldn't figure out how they'd done it.

"Here." She lowered her arm through the protection that only she could pass through and zoomed into the lifemarks. "Let us watch these for a time. I think they'll surprise even you. Perhaps then you'll see their virtue and righteousness."

Helios chuckled and shot her a side-eyed glare. "Very well, young one. Astound me." He returned his attention to the image and nodded. "What am I looking at?"

Her eyes sparkled, catching the azure glint of Earth's oceans. "I believe they call it a... sub-marine."

Act I

“Greed has no boundaries”

The Tempest



The knife, a large fire alarm, a call to action. Captain Kel Williams and the crew of the HMS *Bancroft* flew into a well-rehearsed dance of survival, snatching up their Emergency Air Breathers with practiced hands. After strapping on the form-fitting device and connecting to the nearby air manifold, Kel secured her burn hood against the threat of flames. Her gaze flicked to the overhead computer display, assessing the boat's status, while around her, the crew performed a silent ballet of safety checks with one another, ensuring not a sliver of their skin was left vulnerable. Satisfied their EABs were secure, they pivoted back to their stations, ready to wrestle their submersible from the jaws of calamity.

"Fire in the galley. I repeat, there is a fire in the galley," Müller, their German communications officer, said over the boat-wide intercom. "The deep-fat fryers appear to have ignited. Rig for fire and general emergency. All hands, seal your compartments."

Kel lowered her gaze from the display and stepped up behind her crew. They'd prepared for this moment countless times, performing fire drills at all hours of the day and night. Not that the time of day mattered under nearly a kilometer of ocean water.

Just days earlier, the crew had been blindsided by a drill and narrowly averted disaster, but today their response was immediate and unwavering. What they didn't know, however, was that this particular fire was also a ruse. One not at all like the others before

it.

She was playing along, taking it as seriously as they were. As the captain, she had to. It was her nightmare and sixth sense that had brought this on in the first place. When she took a final account of the crew around her, she paused, a growl escaping her lips.

“Crewman Hinault!” She stepped up behind him, rapping her knuckles on his chair. “If you’ve any fondness for your extremities, I suggest you don your gloves whilst on the bridge.” She pointed at his naked hands. “You’re our eyes and ears up here, trainee. Our last line of defense should matters go pear-shaped. Don’t be an oxygen thief. Where’d you train, Pyongyang?”

Without a word, Warfare Officer in Training Hinault retrieved his gloves from a compartment below his station before sliding them on. He knew enough not to react in any other way but with swift resolve. Until a trainee proved their worth and earned their dolphin badge, they were seen as next to useless. Or merely oxygen thieves, as the crew called them.

Kel reached down to her leg and detached her mobile command tablet where the drill she’d created was playing out. She’d jolted awake this morning from yet another ghastly nightmare, making her question the technology they had at their disposal. One of the perks of being captain was having your own soundproof cabin and rack. If she hadn’t, there’s no telling the rumors that would circulate after someone heard her screams.

As the klaxons repeatedly rang out, she tapped the screen to advance to the next stage of the drill. The virtual fire spread rapidly, and within seconds, it reached one of their communication rooms, taking out their blue laser and Very Long Frequency gear. Without their laser or VLF receivers, they were cut off from the rest of the world and Central Command. Especially since they weren’t anywhere near an IUSS or FISUS array. The antique American sound and modern EU fiber surveillance systems kept them connected to Command. Without any of that communications equipment, recovery would be impossible as it would reveal their

position.

“That’s some bull!” Müller slammed her gloved hand on the edge of her station, being careful not to crack the carbon alloy frame or hit the display panels.

Kel walked back to her side. “Is there a problem, Officer?”

“No disrespect, ma’am, but there’s no way the fire jumped half the boat like that. There’s something off here.” Müller peered sideways, making eye contact with Kel before returning her attention to her controls. She must have somehow realized this was another drill.

Kel tapped her tablet and shared her view of the boat with Müller’s control panel. When she did, the woman winced. What she hadn’t seen were the open bulkhead hatches between the galley and communication rooms.

Müller locked her jaw and nodded. “Damn all the thieves,” she muttered before reaching forward and patching through to the forward comm rooms. “Ilda! Are you still awake down there?”

“Yea. I mean, yes, ma’am!” Trainee Ilda Halla, an engineering technician, said.

“You’re dead!” Müller adjusted the microphone on her EAB. “You left the aft hatch open. Flag anyone red within five meters.”

“Shi—” she began as she cut the line.

“What in blazes happened?” XO Collins asked from the distant hatch entrance. He hopped through the opening onto the bridge, making sure to seal it closed behind him.

Kel wished he’d have left it open. It’d make her morning to red flag the prick herself. After their private disagreement the other night, she was still fuming and centimeters away from writing him up with Command. He had years of insubordination write-ups on his record, and this would surely end him.

She took a deep breath, pushing the argument to the back of her mind and focusing on the drill. Her people needed to make the right decisions under pressure, and them arguing wouldn’t help.

“We have a fire in the galley, and it spread to the forward

communication rooms,” Hinault said, nodding toward the arriving XO.

Collins tilted his head and cracked his neck. His hair was still a mess from being woken up. “On the bottom of the damn Pacific? Who the hell was cooking on duty? This—”

“It’s a drill,” Kel said, eyeing her tablet. She tapped the screen, advancing to phase three of the exercise. The klaxons blared again, and swearing permeated the bridge.

“We’ve got significant leaks in the forward ballasts from the heat,” Müller said, rapidly tapping her touchscreen to issue orders and route details to the crew. “We need to dump the auxiliary, compensating, and trim tanks. Get a water team on those flames, for Christ’s sake. Coxswain, bring us to emergency tether depth to signal Command. I repeat, bring us to emergency tether depth.”

Collins studied Kel. “You’re kidding me with this, right? You’re running a drill in the middle of the Pacific while we’re working our way towards Mariana?” He had tried to whisper, but like all things on a submarine, there were ears everywhere.

She snapped her head around and caught his stare. “Last I checked, our XO had unfortunately met his demise in the corridor. The man dallied with his trousers for too long whilst engulfed in flames. Müller is at the helm this morning. Now, if you’d cease your incessant undermining of my command and hold your tongue, the crew might actually get the rest of us through this alive.”

Unlike him, she made no attempt to soften her words. His actions from days before were still fresh in her mind. While her manner of dressing him down in front of the crew was against protocol, she didn’t care. Not now. Not after the message from Command.

You could hear a pin drop as all eyes on the bridge focused on them, at least until she whirled around. When she did, they all jerked their heads back to their stations. Suddenly, the boat groaned, and she grabbed a pole beside her as the submarine started to climb to tether depth. Had they not been a stealth

submarine, she wouldn't have attempted this drill. If they could sneak up and snatch a Chinese sonar tracking buoy without being detected, they could certainly run a fire drill and not expose their location. What made her restless was something far more worrisome. If they had technology like the HMS *Bancroft* in their fleet, she shuddered at the thought of what their enemies had.

"Fire in galley and neighboring compartments suppressed. Fire suppressed." Müller made the sign of the cross before continuing. "Thirty meters to tether depth."

They'd been running silent for over four weeks. After leaving port at HMNB Clyde in the UK, they pushed hard for the tip of South America. Then they made an elongated arc towards Antarctica, all the while steering relatively clear of the tracking buoys littering the ocean floor. The Chinese regularly sank them in deep water to record and track the comings and goings of all commercial and military boats. They denied it, of course, but Command had evidence of their civilian tankers dropping sonar buoys firsthand.

Her team had actually taken a detour and recovered one on this trip to stress test their equipment and stealth capabilities. It was after this side trip that she and Collins had their first tussle. He insisted on running the analysis of the buoy, and she wanted her weapons engineering team to run the show. Like the fire drills, they needed the practice. Needless to say, she got her way, but Collins was none too happy.

After that recent outburst between the two of them, she expected some of her crew would request a transfer when this mission was over. That, or they'd have a newfound respect for meticulous grooming and teams that worked together like a well-oiled machine. Besides, she didn't expect Collins to last as her XO past this tour.

"Approaching tether depth," Müller said.

"Raising secondary blue laser tether," Hinault said, his voice cracking. "Tether released. Thirty seconds to broadcast depth."

She'd put the fear into him, and while he usually came out of it quickly, many a sailor had cracked under similar pressure. If he snapped, he could be wobbling all the way to the next port. When she walked back to his position, she swore he flinched when she stepped up behind him.

As a CO of the first stealth submarine built since the United Kingdom rejoined the European Union, she had to run a tight boat. Any number of countries would kill to get their hands on this boat's design. In fact, had she not been involved in creating the beast, she'd never believe what it was capable of if you'd told her. She'd been downright pissed when they were forced to share their tech with the EU. But without them, the UK might still be cascading towards their fiscal extinction.

Bloody idiots and their Brexit. If they hadn't left the EU, they wouldn't have hit rock bottom at the worst possible time in history. Being an island country, you'd think someone would've run a few simulations to show the powers that be what could happen if the water rose around the world. Like all things in politics and men, they refused to look beyond their continent-sized egos.

She dismissed the thought quickly; dwelling on past failures was never productive. Doing so often risked unearthing lingering remnants of self-doubt.

Hinault adjusted in his seat. "Tether at broadcast depth. Commencing distress signal to—"

"Hold that order, sailor," Kel interrupted, patting the trainee on the shoulder before turning and stepping back to Müller's side. "Open a blue sky link to Command using these crypto codes. Redirect the feed into my ready room." She handed CIS Müller a small blue envelope of codes from her war deck, a one and done deck of cryptographic ciphers used to connect directly to Command in an emergency.

Müller's eyes went wide, and her hand started shaking as she took the envelope. The officer had seen countless pink slip versions of these ciphers in the past during training exercises, but this blue

one was legit. It was a specially designed envelope and paper stock that would destroy itself once opened. The ink would detangle from the paper fibers and evaporate within minutes, rendering it blank and impossible to deduce what had been present. It was old school, but submariners often were.

After their sub had slipped through the frigid waters near the remains of the southern ice shelf, they headed northwest and were now crawling into the southern end of the Mariana Trench, the front line of a new war. One not waged over traditional land grabs but instead fought over biomass: untouched and pure biological material that could hold the cures to diseases or possibly form the foundation for new crops. One day, these foodstuffs could save humanity from its collision course with extinction. These biological specimens were as pure as you could get after humans dumped as many toxins in Earth's oceans as they had. Believe it or not, there were actually a few deeper sections of the ocean that the deadly touch of humanity had yet to infiltrate.

"I... thought this was a training exercise?" Müller flipped the envelope over and over in her hands, gawking at it like it wasn't real.

Kel nodded. "While I was up late last night planning this maneuver, I received a secure request to surface this morning. Two birds, one stone, as they say. Now..." She rapped her knuckles on Müller's chair to get her attention. "You have your orders, Officer."

Müller swallowed hard. "And... what about the drill, ma'am?"

"Hinault!" She glanced to her left.

"Yes, ma'am," he snapped, turning to face her.

"CIS Müller has been incapacitated from smoke inhalation." She pointed at him. "I'm placing you in charge for the remainder of this exercise. Now, see to those leaks."

"Yes, ma'am!" He returned his attention back to his controls and started issuing orders to the rest of the crew, his voice no longer cracking under the pressure.

Maybe he wouldn't wobble out after all.

She pivoted towards XO Collins, her face a visage of disdain. His apparent contempt for her only magnified her own. After she lifted her EAB off her head, she stowed it and then tweaked her light-brown hair into place. “You’ll accompany me into my ready room.” She didn’t wait for a response; she simply stepped around him.

Without a word, he followed her down-boat about ten meters to her quarters. Once inside, he sealed the cramped compartment of her ready room and flicked on the external privacy light so they wouldn’t be disturbed. It wasn’t so much a ready room as an oversized phone booth. You could fit four to five people standing chest to chest with space to breathe and maybe spin around, but barely.

They waited in silence for the connection to be made to AAFEUS Command. The joint Australian African European Union United States alliance’s acronym didn’t roll off the tongue like NATO, but the military wasn’t much for creativity when world wars were on the brink.

She checked her watch. Müller should be connecting them any second now. She’d be checking and double-checking the codes as fast as she could to make sure they matched before disappearing into thin air. Kel refused to bring up the act of insubordination Collins had made in front of the crew. He knew what he’d done, and he’d either own up to his mistakes or risk falling out of her favor even more.

The touch panel to her left came to life and was displaying the AAFEUS logo, a blob of continents forming a crude constellation. It usually appeared for a second until all the satellites established their links and prepared for the handoff and signal randomization. Their satellites would spray the ocean with noise directed at millions of points around the globe to prevent anyone who might be eavesdropping from precisely triangulating the submersible’s location. While you knew a communication was ongoing, it was impossible to deduce the target.

When the alliance logo disappeared, it was replaced with the

face of Fleet Admiral Ellis of the AAFEUS Alliance. To his left was the chief of defense, Real Admiral Gamal. She was a new entry into the geopolitical fray and hailed from Egypt in the African Union. In the early 2030s, the United States and the European Union repeated the strategy they'd employed with the Australians and armed the Egyptian Navy. They claimed it was in response to expanded Asian and Russian influence in the region, but not everyone was convinced. Real Admiral Gamal, being in such a prominent military and political role, helped to cement Africa in the alliance after nearly a decade of tumultuous relations. Africa was too important geographically to let them fall to the siren song of the communist regimes.

Kel came to attention alongside Collins, and they both saluted the screen.

"At ease, CO Williams, XO Collins." Fleet Admiral Ellis nodded at each of them. "We don't have time for idle chitchat. A dispute just broke out off Guam, near the section of the Trench you're heading toward. We need you to hold your position until the Egyptian *Tefnut* and *Shu* arrive, along with the USS *Walrus* and *Oarfish*."

Kel's muscles tensed, and she clasped her hands behind her back to avoid detection. This didn't feel right. Rapid deployment of five submarines, one of which was a modern marvel of their fleet, wasn't a strategy she'd ever seen employed so suddenly. She studied their faces, looking for any clues of tension on their end of the uplink. While Fleet Admiral Ellis was a statue, Real Admiral Gamal had a smirk on her face, like she'd won a bet or was getting her way somehow.

"Can you tell us the parameters of the mission?" XO Collins asked.

She took a breath, turning her head briefly to make eye contact with him before returning her attention to the Fleet Admiral. He hadn't even given them a chance to provide details. She never wanted Collins as her XO on this mission, but Rear Admiral Acosta

assured her it was only temporary until they finished building his boat.

“I was about to get to that, XO,” Real Admiral Gamal said. Her smirk had been wiped away. “The HMS *Bancroft* is to hold position until your alliance members arrive. At that time, you’ll head to the Mariana Trench. Your destination is marked as location Alpha on the map we’re providing. An African private automated research submersible discovered a large pocket of biomass in a recently exposed cave system near the bottom of the Trench. Unfortunately, we have a leak somewhere in the ranks, and our Chinese and Soviet friends are en route to stake the claim before us.”

Collins crossed his arms, clearly frustrated at being called out twice in one morning. If she knew him, he’d be tight-lipped from here on out, and if she was lucky, for the rest of the day.

The map of the Mariana Trench appeared on the second LCD beside the camera. Kel leaned forward and manipulated the display, panning around before zooming into the Alpha discovery site. When she saw it, her lip twitched. If it were any other location, she wouldn’t have reacted.

“I know you see it, Kel,” Fleet Admiral Ellis said.

She glanced at his face and then back at the display, continuing to zoom in further. “Is it the same cave system, sir?”

“You wouldn’t have found it in your first pass, but it was in range of your secondary sweep parameters.”

She leaned against the wall and took a deep breath. This wasn’t happening. If they’d just listened to her team, they’d have a permanent foothold on top of that site with non-military vessels. A few years back, she’d proposed using their new stealth tech to create a school of automated submersibles for this exact purpose. To explore these cave systems that were constantly being uncovered by the warming waters and shifting sands of the ocean. But the brass wouldn’t authorize their creation without evidence of biomass. It was a classic catch-22. To find the biomass, you needed the subs, but to get the subs, you needed the biomass. No matter how hard

she tried, she couldn't get them to see it. At least not without calling them out for the stodgy asses they were. Rather than do that, she'd chosen to keep her pension and bring her tech to defend her country in whatever way she could. There was also the small matter that the AAFEUS brass preferred to throw their money into human submersibles over unmanned ones. Ever since a prototype automated Chinese submarine sank three cruise ships off Shanghai in the '40s, the world feared robotic warfare.

"Are either of you going to clue us in to what you're talking about?" Real Admiral Gamal glanced between the Fleet Admiral and Kel on the screen.

"It's not important, Real Admiral." Fleet Admiral Ellis waved his hand.

Kel straightened her posture and re-clasped her hands behind her back. "Might I suggest we recon the Trench surrounding the Alpha point first? We can double back to meet up with the others. From the looks of it, we have ample time."

"That won't be necessary," Real Admiral Gamal began. "Our team will be in your vicinity in a little over twenty-four hours."

"That's plenty of time to recon the situation and come about to rendezvous."

Real Admiral Gamal tilted her head. "I don't see how that's possible. To move at that speed... you'd need a supercavitating drive."

"Like I said earlier," Fleet Admiral Ellis began, eyeing his colleague and then returning his attention to Kel. "The HMS *Bancroft* has a few tricks up its sleeve we've kept under wraps. CO Williams, I approve your plan. Whatever you do, stay silent and avoid detection. Once you've assessed the situation, if it's safe, uplink any intel to our FISUS array near Guam before doubling back."

Kel nodded. "Yes, sir."

The look of shock and frustration on Real Admiral Gamal's face was priceless.

“And, Kel?” Fleet Admiral Ellis raised his hand and then lowered it. She could almost see him second-guessing his gesture.

“Yes, sir?”

“CO Friedrich on the USS *Walrus* will be in charge of the primary mission. You’ll be running as his second-in-command.” He paused to judge her response to his words.

Kel never expected she’d be a second to her ex-husband, least of all in this moment. Her moment. He’d given into her request to do the recon as a chance to bury the lead.

She kept her cool and held her poker face. Letting her feelings out in front of Collins wouldn’t help anyone. It would only give him ammunition to hold against her later. “Yes, sir. Understood.”

The connection was quiet until Real Admiral Gamal broke the silence. “If there’s nothing else, we’ve transmitted the full details of the mission. The longer this channel remains open, the more likely we compromise your position. It shouldn’t need to be said, but I will anyway. It’s imperative we obtain this biomass in pristine form before the Chinese. If possible, we should defend the cave systems until reinforcements arrive. We have a naval fleet scrambling off Alexandria, but we prefer not to send them into the area until it’s secure. There’s no point in showing our hand unless absolutely necessary. They’re still at least a week or more out. The US has a few ships near Hawaii they can redirect until our African fleet arrives. Good luck, and Godspeed!”

The line cut and the screen switched back to the AAFEUS logo. In the corner, her secure message indicator flashed yellow, reminding her of the mission briefing the admiral had mentioned.

Luck wasn’t something she imagined she’d need on her maiden voyage. She’d been giddy leaving port, taking the *Bancroft* on tour. The fact that their first mission was such a high-profile target made her emotions leap from excited to anxious. Add her ex-husband to the mix, and you added insecurity with a pinch of sexual tension. They were the makings of a tempest in a teakettle.

Bull Nuke



Catherine restrained herself, not wanting to clutter her mind with Admiral Ellis was on about, or are we playing out this charade of a mission briefing?” His voice broke the silence that had settled since the admiral’s admonishment—a rare crack in the armor of a senior officer not accustomed to such bruising blows to their ego, especially not multiple times in the same hour.

She would’ve preferred some quiet time to digest the news, but she knew better than to let him see her uncomfortable. While she wasn’t inclined to engage in a verbal sparring match, a few minutes reviewing the briefing together wouldn’t hurt. She reached forward and tapped the flashing yellow icon in the corner of the screen, and the waiting brief took over her console.

It showed a map of the region that she’d reviewed during the uplink and the deeper details of the excursion they were undertaking. As she scrolled through the parameters, her stomach tightened. “This is gonna be a hot zone if we don’t get out there soon.”

“Is this right?” He leaned forward and highlighted the intel they had on the Chinese and Russian inbound boats. “They’re each sending in six of their submarines along with surface support.” He reached up, running his hand through his thinning hair. “Holy crap. Four fast-attack and four ballistic subs each. We’re outgunned before we start.”

She tapped on each of the boats to bring up their details. Though she recognized most of their names, a few were unfamiliar to her. There was a mix of known knowns and a few unknown unknowns. Two of the subs from each of the forces were straight off the assembly line. As far as she knew, they could be as powerful as the *Bancroft* or even more so.

“We’ll have to maintain a low profile until we can assess their capabilities.” She closed out of the threat briefing and continued scanning the friendlies. The American boats were familiar, but the African ones weren’t. They were EU boat designs sold to the Egyptian Navy, and like the Australians, they were built with American reactors. That much was documented. But they hadn’t been in rotation with any of the AAFEUS alliance since going into service. And then there were the boat commanders. Their names were unfamiliar. They were new to commanding a submarine, which made their trustworthiness under pressure worse than not knowing at all.

Collins tapped the screen and brought up the dossier on Commander Radwan of the *Tefnut*. “I’ve heard about this guy. He got into a tussle with his wife a few months back. Cut her from ear to ear and breast to breast for being in public without her niqab.”

She stiffened. “What on Earth? I thought they outlawed wearing those in African nations?”

“They did, but she was visiting her family in Iran when he did it. The whole thing caused quite the controversy in the Middle East. He must have friends in high places, though, because a few days later it disappeared from the press and somehow, he kept his job.”

Commander Radwan’s face reminded her of her secondary school gym teacher. He was an asshole, too, and always treated girls like they were less capable than the boys. The prick was never fond of her showing him up.

She minimized his profile. “Well, he’s in for a rather uncomfortable surprise when he finds me in the second seat, even if it is to my ex.”

Collins glanced at her and then back at the map as she panned around the Alpha site again. “Are you okay with him? I mean—”

“I’ll manage just fine. Joel and I are on good terms. We had to be with Henry and June still in the picture.”

He nodded and fidgeted with his hands, clearly uncomfortable with pursuing his line of questioning any further.

Her kids had been finishing secondary school when she and Joel separated. It was hard enough being a military family. Add to that divorce and her re-enlisting after her kids went off to college, and it made a challenging situation that much more taxing. While she’d branched off into a start-up company while they were still in school, she returned to commanding submarines when her project shifted gears from non-military applications back to military ones. She wasn’t about to let someone else command this submarine in her stead. It was the one thing she’d managed to negotiate when the navy bought out her other investors. Had she not formerly commanded the HMS *Vigilant*, there wasn’t a chance they’d have agreed to her terms.

After another minute of uncomfortable silence studying the map, Collins spoke. “What was Admiral Ellis talking about when he said he knew you were seeing it? When you were exploring the mission dossier.”

While she wasn’t keen to share too many more details of her personal life, she couldn’t hold back info on the Trench. The more he knew heading into this mission, the better. Maybe he’d even start acting like her second-in-command.

She zoomed back to the Alpha point and highlighted a nearby cave system. “During the nascent stage of the supercavitation project, before we designed the superstructure to hold a crew, we were targeting unmanned autonomous research vessels. I had a proposal on the books to explore the Trench. We were planning on starting our exploration near this Alpha point. The automated submersibles were designed to probe the ever-changing sands of the ocean for just this opportunity. After discovering a biomass, they

could capture and transport specimens to the mainland without needing to surface.”

Kel leaned back and crossed her arms. “The bureaucratic bastards still have the array of subs we were gonna use sitting in a storage facility in Clyde. Once we cracked the structural issues plaguing us during those early days, they decided to go another direction. You know how the brass has always had a hard-on for humans underwater. The imbeciles could’ve had this biomass months or even years before the enemy.”

She bit her lip. Her frustration over the whole situation was getting the better of her, and she needed to keep her emotions in check around Collins. She’d already shared too much with him.

“Now we’re playing second fiddle to some Yankees, and...” He didn’t finish the sentence. She knew his feelings about the Africans. He wasn’t exactly tight-lipped when he got a few drinks in him.

The longer she stared at the map, the more her stomach tightened into a knot. The network of caves spidering off the Trench walls had formed during the rise in ocean temperatures in the late twenties and thirties. Deep-water sinkholes opening up, combined with the shifting sands and rocks of the Mariana Trench, uncovered countless never-before-seen cavern systems. The results were the biomass wars of the forties.

Her hand twitched as she reached for the display. The anger had been steadily building into a full head of steam ever since Admiral Ellis had dropped this bombshell. She thought talking about it might help, but she was mistaken. Keeping it at bay much longer wasn’t in the cards, and blowing it off in front of Collins wasn’t about to happen. She needed to walk this off a bit. Perhaps she’d check in on how the crew was doing with her little firefighting challenge.

She gestured over the panel, dismissing and sealing the mission briefing before she reached for the hatch handle.

Collins glanced from the computer to her and then back. “What about the prep? Aren’t we going to discuss what to do next?”

“Let’s reconvene in half an hour. I’ll grab Allen and Marín; their expertise will be invaluable for devising a plan.” She pressed the button to open the hatch, and it made a loud click before swinging outward.

He tilted his head. “Why would we need Marín?”

Kel ignored his question and stepped around the hatch, turning left and heading deeper aft into the boat. Any time one of her crew died in a simulation, she needed to talk to them. With Ilda being a trainee, she ran the risk of cracking if the crew was too rough on her.

She worked her way toward Engineering, spinning the speed wheels and transitioning through the hatches once they opened. As the highly filtered metallic smells of her boat wafted through her nostrils, her pent-up frustration melted away. This boat was too new to have a permanent funk emanating throughout the halls like the older boats in the fleet, but she knew that would arrive with time. Even with advancements in filter technology and chemicals like amine, there was no stopping the stink of sweaty human bodies and grease.

Since the klaxons were off and the lights were no longer flashing, she assumed the exercise was over. The main route aftward was surprisingly void of crew members. They were probably still cleaning up from the mess they’d made handling the virtual fire.

“CO on the deck!” Oscar Allen, her head of Engineering, snapped to attention along with his nearby crew. “It must be time for another readiness check.” A yawn escaped his mouth the moment he paused. He was probably sleeping when the klaxons went off, which meant he hadn’t had breakfast yet. Oscar had been on her original boat over a decade and a half ago, and except for having a massive British chip on his shoulder, he was a rock.

Klein, his right hand in Engineering, smirked while at attention. “Give her a minute. I’m sure she’ll have us checking the hull in a blink. Like all you Brits, you’ll find some reason to kick us out. No,

wait, we kicked you out last time, didn't we? None of that Brexit two-point-zero shit again."

"Har... har..." Kel walked up and placed her hand on Klein's shoulder. "Don't make me bail your German ass out. I seem to recall that financial turmoil in '35 nailed your whole bloody country to the cross. Let's keep our eyes on the mission, shall we?" She gave his shoulder a squeeze.

Klein winced. "Yes, Captain!"

They were a friendly bunch, always taking jabs at each other's heritage and country of origin, especially hers. There wasn't a day that passed they didn't mention Brexit, and sometimes they went too far for her liking.

She used to wonder how they'd react in a real pinch. Well, the time had come when she'd find out. They wouldn't know it until she shared their mission, but that was one of the reasons she kept them on their toes. That and the constant goddamn crazy dreams.

When she turned back toward Oscar, he'd already shifted his focus to his tabletop display. On it, he had a three-dimensional schematic of the boat. He'd been tracking the results of the firefighting exercise. There were markings highlighting where they needed to shore up their training between now and the next exercise. Another yawn broke free from his mouth.

"Report to my ready room in twenty." She nodded toward Oscar.

He raised his eyebrows.

She locked eyes with him, and he understood her without a word. "I'm heading down to the galley," she began. "Can I grab you an elixir of life on the way?"

"Yes, ma'am. That'd be fantastic."

Kel shifted to leave and paused. "Say, where's Ilda? She and I need to talk."

Klein turned around and looked at her. His sneer caught her by surprise. "She's checking the aft gas injectors. I saw Toby follow her down there a few minutes ago."

“Bollocks!” Cary, another engineer-in-training, slammed his hand against the bulkhead. “I ain’t seen no damn cat since we boarded. Stop screwing around. There is no Toby.”

She glanced past Klein at the newly arrived trainee. Oscar mentioned Cary was having trouble adapting to the dolphin culture. “Are you calling your superior officer a liar, oxygen thief?”

Cary did a double-take when he saw her. He hadn’t noticed her arrival and must have assumed Klein was talking to Oscar. “No... ma’am,” he sputtered. “I just haven’t... There can’t be a cat aboard the *Bancroft*. It’s against regs.”

A smirk teased the corner of her mouth. “Are you threatening to turn me in for harboring a feline in my quarters, Trainee?”

He shot a glance at Oscar.

“Don’t look at me. Answer your CO, sailor.”

“No, ma’am!” Cary looked quickly from Oscar to Kel and back again. He then came to attention and saluted Oscar. “I mean, yessir!” He turned his attention back to Kel. “No, ma’am! I am not threatening you, CO... ma’am. I was just... I can’t imagine a cat surviving down here, especially after what we just experienced. You know... the fire.” His entire body shook as he struggled to hold attention, but he managed to maintain his salute, staring past her at the bulkhead.

Kel had better things to do than harp on him endlessly. She needed to find Ilda. “At ease, sailor. And the answer to your concern is, yes, it is indeed perilous down here. That’s why Toby is a rather extraordinary feline. When you see him, show ’em some love. In fact, maybe you should keep some scraps around. You know, in case he’s peckish.”

Oscar raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, ma’am! I will, ma’am.” Cary lowered his hand and eased up, though his left leg continued to bounce.

She glanced at her watch and then toward Oscar. “Make that fifteen minutes.”

“Fifteen minutes. Yes, ma’am.” He nodded.

A clang echoed down the corridor from where Cary had entered. A second later, a faint voice called out. "Perkele!" Had she not known better, she would have thought that was a sailor calling someone else's name. But she'd been around enough Finns to recognize a swear word when she heard it.

She stepped through the hatch and slid down several ladders, weaving her way further aft. This end of the boat reminded her of the years they'd spent in the confines of the testing facilities. The aromatic scent of oil, grease, and metal was as comforting to her as baby powder. She yearned for that simpler time, before politics took over. She and Oscar had poured their blood, sweat, and tears into bringing this super submarine to life.

As she came to the belly of the *Bancroft*, she found Ilda lying on her stomach, dangling over an open grate, tweaking one of the supercavitating gas injectors. She knew better than to sneak up on a busy sailor without making herself heard. Especially one leaning over and working on a particularly important piece of equipment.

Kel tapped her hand on the railing and clicked her mouth a few times, like she'd been trained to do so many years ago. Ilda didn't flinch, but she didn't look either.

"Dammit, Cary. Whatcha need? I told you to leave me in peace. I can't have a few minutes to my..." Ilda glanced backward. "Oh, crap! I'm sorry, ma'am." She started to roll over, scrambling to get up.

"At ease, sailor." Kel waved her hand and sat down. "You're fine, but we need to talk."

Ilda sat up and gazed at her for a moment. Once she realized what the visit was about, she wrapped her arms around her knees. "I'm sorry about getting myself and the others killed during the exercise. With all the commotion, I... thought someone was behind me, but there wasn't. I broke protocol. I realize I should have checked and sealed the room before advancing toward Engineering."

Kel leaned back against the railing, arms crossed. "Your actions

endangered everyone in Engineering and on this boat.”

Ilda rocked forward and back, nodding for a few seconds. “I know. I fraked up. The others have already made it painfully obvious. I’m prepared to accept my punishment, ma’am.” She looked up and locked her gaze on Kel.

She recognized the determination in the dolphin’s eyes. They were the same piercing green as her daughter, June, something she’d inherited from her father.

“Taking some heat already, are we?” Kel asked.

The dolphin nodded. “And rightfully so, ma’am. Like you said, my mistake could’ve cost lives. Bull Nuke Allen and EDO Klein already said I’d be pulling extra duties and running drills down here in Engineering.”

Kel stared at the trainee. So much about the woman’s profile had reminded her of herself when she’d read it. Even the bad marks from her previous CO. The guy had been a sexist idiot from a bygone era of dolphins.

“I’ve never told anyone this,” Kel began, “but my first three fire drills aboard the HMS *Vigilant* were abysmal failures.”

Ilda stopped rocking and her eyes went wide. “Are you serious?”

She chuckled. “The first time the klaxons blared, I was in a right state. I about shat myself. When the CO asked if I’d paid someone to take the drills for me at the academy, I froze. I think he took me for a cheat for my first six months on board. Man... he was relentless on me back then.”

“How’d you make it?” Ilda relaxed and crossed her legs. “I mean, after failing three times. Your mates must’ve been riding you like a bronco.”

“They did, and they had every reason to. I was a liability. After that, I almost bowed out and quit.”

Ilda shook her head. “So, what happened?”

“Oscar Allen happened.”

Ilda coughed into her hand. “As in our Bull Nuke Allen? The man who tossed me two extra rotations?”

She grinned. “The one and only. Except back then, he wasn’t the Bull Nuke. He was just another pimple-faced trainee like me.”

“Wow, times have changed.”

Kel leaned closer to the dolphin. “They have. He stepped out of being a trainee and into the role of trainer. The one responsible for lives on board this boat. The person people turn to when the chips are down. You’ll do anything and everything he asks you to do. Hell, you’ll even volunteer for more. The sooner you can stop being an oxygen thief, the safer we’ll all be. Is that understood?”

Ilda swallowed hard and dipped her head. “Yes, ma’am.”

Kel pushed up and straightened her trousers before turning to leave.

The dolphin followed suit and scrambled to her feet before saluting. “Ma’am. What about your punishment?”

She paused and didn’t turn back before replying. “It sounds like our Bull Nuke has that handled. Just do me a favor.”

Silence hung in the air for a second, as if she seemed to be contemplating what to say. Finally, Ilda replied. “Anything, ma’am.”

“When it all goes south—and it will—keep your wits about you. Persevere. Is that clear?”

“Crystal, ma’am. And... thank you.” Ilda nodded.

Kel took a deep breath and started toward the bow. She had to find Weapons Officer Marín before she grabbed that coffee.

Supercavitating



The briefing was thorough, but the decision she was making Collins questioned her. It was never a turn over the line. She'd expected Collins for volunteering for this recon mission. He'd made it clear he wasn't keen on heading into the front lines without support craft. His attitude was the reason the navy had relegated submarines to simply being missile-launching platforms and nuclear deterrents, rather than aggressors. She'd tried to make the case against putting Collins on her boat to Admiral Ellis, but he wouldn't budge. He said it was good that she had someone to challenge her. While she recognized the potential in her boat's design, she still had to win over the rest of the naval brass to change their perspective, and they weren't exactly known for their malleable opinion.

It'd been over one hundred years since the last use of submarines in a war. They'd played supporting roles in multiple encounters over the decades and had even been used to launch a few strikes during smaller conflicts, but they were always in the shadows and never the front lines. It was something every naval officer in charge of a fleet reminded their submarine COs. Submariners were softies and needed to learn how to operate on the razor's edge if they were ever going to return to the battlefield.

She stared at the wall of bubbles flowing over the cone of their boat. They'd been supercavitating for nearly three hours. Watching the sheath of gas cascade along the hull permeated with thousands of bubble injectors was mesmerizing. The gas barrier helped to

lower the local pressure against their boat and made it easier to keep them cavitated. The differential rocket thrusters situated around the aft hull and the articulating spines throughout the HMS *Bancroft* were among some of its best-kept secrets. They enabled the submersible to traverse the random ocean currents faster than the speed of sound, something that was impossible for most missiles and vessels with lesser technology.

Their research in recent years had gone into nose cone designs and creative ways to reuse thrust from their rocket propulsion to feed their supercavitating bubble injectors. Increasing the cavitation potential was the biggest challenge on any submersible, and with a boat this size, it had been written off as an impossibility decades ago. Simply put, the larger the object, the harder it was to break the speed of sound underwater.

As Kel looked over the shoulder of Larsson, their coxswain, a chuckle escaped.

“Is everything ok, ma’am?” Larsson asked, keeping his eyes on his controls.

She smiled. “Apologies, I was simply relishing the experience at the helm, heading into our first op. It’s not every day you take your life’s work into a confrontation at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean.”

“Understood, ma’am. We’re coming up on our exit. T minus five minutes.”

“Roger that.” Kel tapped her earpiece and connected to the boat-wide channel. Each sailor had an earpiece in their ear that could be hardwired to terminals throughout the boat. “Rig for dive and silent running! We’re going to thuh-ree thousand meters as soon as we drop out of this cav.”

Each compartment reported back electronically that they were rigged for a silent dive. If they hadn’t been prepped to run silent, or if they’d been experiencing technical difficulties, they would have used audible acknowledgments.

The dive lights flashed overhead and drew her gaze. Even though the supercavitating drive and their motion through water

was far from noiseless, no one in the world knew their acoustic signature. It would take time to triangulate and target them. Being an unknown bogie should give them cover for several minutes, despite sound traveling faster in water than air. Fortunately, they'd be in stealth as soon as they dropped out of their cavitation. Unlike their predecessors, the *Bancroft* rarely needed to rig for ultra-quiet with all the sound suppressors and noise-dampening gear in the hull.

Kel engaged the boat-wide channel one last time. "Steady nerves and laser focus are essential. No one is expecting us, so we have the element of surprise. We'll be doing passive observations for a few hours, so we'll want to keep our audible levels on snooze. I have faith in all of you. Just remember, your training and aptitude got each of you selected for this boat. And, for Heaven's sake, look after Toby."

Chuckles sounded throughout the bridge. At least people were in good spirits. Everyone except Collins. She hoped that held.

Larsson broke the moment of levity. "Dropping out of cav in fi-yiv, fo-wer, thuh-ree, too, wun, we're back to slow-mo."

Kel tightened her grip on the pole to her left as the cavitation injectors slowed their production of bubbles to a stop. At first, the forward hull made a symphony of bending sounds under the added pressure without the protective layer of bubbles. But the adaptive nose cone quickly dissipated any noise, and in under a minute the friction of the water brought the boat to a relative crawl through the life-giving fluid.

"Dive, dive, dive!" she said as she leaned into the pole.

The dive alarm lights flashed and the boat groaned again, this time from the gradual reconfiguration into its diving shape. Unlike with traditional submarines, the back and forth confirmation and reconfirmation of orders wasn't strictly necessary. In fact, it was downright dangerous at their current speed. The pilot and co-pilot were in complete control over the boat. All the captain or XO had to do was give the target depth and issue the dive order. In this case,

they'd already programmed their target depth before they entered the cav, so the rest was up to them.

As the HMS *Bancroft* dove, it tilted down nearly forty-five degrees. They could, in theory, dive faster, but she wasn't about to test every trick up their sleeve on their first voyage.

What made this dive different from most, however, was the spiral motion. Rather than diving in a straight line like most submersibles, the articulating omnidirectional spine of their boat meant it could take less traditional paths through the water, further confusing their enemies and allowing them to evade detection. Or at least that's what it showed on paper. This was their first test in the field.

"Wun ze-ro fi-yiv ze-ro meters," Larsson whispered. The depth was also ticking down on the wall display overhead for everyone on the bridge to see.

It had taken her several months in the navy to get used to how dolphins pronounced numbers in submersibles. The lengths people went to, to prevent misunderstandings spawned from the English language, was astounding.

She glanced to her right and eyed Müller's display. The passive scans had been running since they'd transitioned; after which, she'd deployed their listening gear, enabling them to pick up fainter noise during the dive. Her best tech worked when they were stationary, but something was better than nothing.

From the looks of her screen, she'd already triangulated a few bogies. The red and yellow squares of death painted the three-dimensional battlefield: red for the Russian-designed boats and yellow for the Chinese. While it didn't guarantee the country's flag they flew, it was a starter and usually aligned with the boat's loyalty. It was remarkable what you could detect about a boat from its simple noises alone, especially when they weren't trying to run silent. Certainly, if they'd detected the *Bancroft* coming, they would have gone silent ahead of their arrival.

As they spiraled past the fifteen-hundred-meter mark, the dots

rose higher above them. Not many boats were designed for the depths of the Trench, at least not many manned ones. All sides had robotic submersibles, but controlling them was far from ideal without a tether, and it was easy to disrupt their signals if needed. She'd heard rumors of the Chinese creating a new deep-ocean model, but, like with the *Bancroft*, no one had seen it yet.

They were diving well below the normal operational depths of most submarines on purpose. The deeper they got, the less likely they'd be detected, and the easier it would be for them to observe from afar. While the Mariana Trench was more than eleven-thousand meters deep, most of the time anyone went there, they were sending autonomous or specially designed research submersibles. They, however, weren't hamstrung by these depths.

The nano-tube-reinforced titanium hull hadn't produced even a creak on the dive yet. The only noise the *Bancroft* had made after dropping out of the cav was when the spine of the boat was sliding into position as they formed their spiral diving shape. Once in place, their dive speed was relatively fast. The three-thousand-meter target depth was well within their regular operating parameters. They weren't even close to their theoretical crush depth of seven-thousand meters. But that wasn't a test she wanted to run on this mission.

"Too ze-ro double ze-ro meters," Larsson said, his voice only a hushed murmur in her ear.

She hadn't realized it, but her heart was racing. It'd been almost two decades since she'd been anywhere near a confrontation like this, and that hadn't ended well for the other side.

Müller interrupted the pillow-soft voice of the pilot. "I'm picking up active turbine signatures beneath us. Twenty degrees down angle, forty-five degrees port, and about twenty clicks out."

"All ahead silent," Kel whispered. While she knew speaking quietly wasn't necessary with the noise-dampening equipment they had on board, keeping everyone focused and in the zone was more important.

If the Russians or Chinese had a boat this deep, it had to be one of their newer models. She leaned toward Müller for a closer look at his display. Except for the audible, they had no other details, so the computer marked it with a floating orange question mark on the battlefield. He'd picked up ten submersibles so far: five Russian, four Chinese, and one unknown. That left six still unaccounted for if their intel was worth a grain of salt.

The countdown flashed overhead, announcing another five-hundred meters. They were nearing their target depth and close to the next stage of their plan.

"I'm picking up an active sonar ping from the Ruskies," Müller said. "They appear to be probing our supercav exit point."

She hadn't expected them to resort to active sonar so soon. Even if they were nervous about the unknown cavitation sound on the scene, when you're underwater, you're usually safer waiting for signals to arrive to give away any clues. One thing was clear, however: these bogies had a short fuse, making an already tense situation worse. This biomass had better be worth it.

"Aren't they worried about the Chinese?" Kel asked.

Müller shook her head. "Apparently not, ma'am. Maybe they're in this together."

That wouldn't bode well for their team set to arrive in a few days. "Are we in their line of sight?"

"Negative, not yet."

When she glanced at Larsson's display, she noticed they were still a few hundred meters from their target depth and were just as far from the nearest trench wall.

She leaned closer to Larsson. "Adjust course to port and bring us down there." She pointed at what his instrument reported as a sandy ledge ten meters shy of the Trench's precipitous drop.

"You want me to set the boat on the ocean floor, ma'am?" Larsson stared up at her and swallowed hard, taking out the silver cross around his neck and rubbing it between his fingers. He was a devout Christian and led the mass every Sunday on the *Bancroft*. He

also ran a Bible study class whenever he had any takers, which on a submarine varied depending on your time on duty and your degree of wobbling.

She nodded. "Don't worry. The *Bancroft* will hold up. If he can survive seven-thousand meters, he can handle some sand on his belly. Try to take him down carefully and reform our shape into an elongated S as you go."

Going from a supersonic underwater cavitation to lying motionless at the bottom of the ocean was an extreme maneuver that no submariner alive would ever attempt. But the only way to dodge a sonar was to not be in its direct path or to drop below the source's thermocline. Otherwise, you needed to sit still and hope they couldn't pick up your signature, which they usually could.

Their hull design should both absorb some of the signal and deflect it away from the source. While it wasn't sand, the acoustic properties of their boat were another closely held secret no one had seen in the wild. If her theory held, it should throw them off.

The minutes that followed ticked by slower than she'd anticipated. She kept eyeing the sonar net the Russians were casting. They started far above their current thermocline, but from the changes in their search grid, they were diving deeper, hunting for the source of the noise.

For a minute, she thought they were going to be pinged until the quiet hum of their cavitation bubblers kicked in. They weren't being used for another supersonic launch. This time, Larsson was using them to lower the *Bancroft* onto the sandy flat they'd picked out minutes earlier.

Kel tilted her ear toward the ceiling. She could hear a faint scratching noise reverberating the length of the boat. It reminded her of the garden windmill her neighbor used to have in their backyard. That was until she took on her first covert op after she'd left the navy. With an oilcan in hand, and masked under the veil of darkness, she'd put an end to the incessant sound and had many peaceful sleeps with the windows open after that night.

Fortunately, this scraping sound ended in short order, and then a moment later all engines went silent. She hadn't even heard the spine hull plating reshape from their spiral descent form to the elongated S shape she'd called for earlier. Her Engineering team had outdone themselves, keeping that part of the design within her stringent operating parameters.

They'd almost ditched the complicated spine design early in the *Bancroft* project after numerous failures and noise complications. She'd convinced the brass to keep going, however, claiming that without it, the supercavitating potential of the boat could never be met. It wasn't entirely a lie. They could've broken the speed of sound for shorter distance hops, but only as long as they didn't encounter water turbulence.

She glanced around the bridge, realizing only now that her team was both manning their posts and eyeing her for orders. Beyond waiting and seeing, there wasn't much else they could do.

When she looked at Müller's screen, she did a double take. Her display was lit up with over two dozen points of contact. Equal parts Russian and Chinese. Sonar was a great equalizer in battle. If you used it to locate the enemy, it also gave away your position.

"Tell me those are abnormalities?" Kel circled her hand over the sea of colored squares on Müller's screen.

"No, ma'am," Müller whispered. "We're pretty much surrounded. Whoever gave us that intel should be properly tubed. But only after we kick 'em in the nuts." She glanced up at her. "Assuming they have nuts, that is."

A wry smile crept into the edge of Kel's mouth. "A reasonable assumption, I dare say." She reached out and gestured in front of her screen. "So if my math's working, we've got a dozen ancient submersibles with a max depth of six hundred meters, a half dozen twenty-first-century fifteen hundred meter bogies, and another half dozen unknowns. Are these two right?" She tapped the two deep orange question marks.

Müller used her touchpad to zoom in on the points of interest.

“That’s affirmative. They’re at six thousand meters, not far from the entrance to the Alpha cave system we’re all here for.”

“Frak,” she muttered.

Müller’s hand twitched, but Kel thought better than to look at her. She knew what they were seeing was less than ideal. Having their biomass target already being circled by a pack of wolves was disconcerting, but she wasn’t writing it off as a lost cause. Not yet. The tables could turn in their favor in the blink of an eye. Especially with three quarters of the enemy boats incapable of engaging them outside lobbing torpedoes, assuming they were even effective beyond a few thousand meters. It was a new game of underwater warfare at these depths, and they were one of the first teams on the playing field.

Suddenly, the lights around the perimeter of the room flashed yellow, and a faint ping echoed in her earpiece. She glared at the ceiling. They were being actively pinged with sonar. The noise sent shivers up her spine each time she was on the receiving end. While not her first experience in this situation, it was the first time she’d been in command. Everything they’d done to stay hidden was now either going to pay off or end abruptly.

Returning her attention to Müller’s display, the active sonar pings continued panning around the field, filling out the picture of the ocean below. They didn’t appear to be focusing on the *Bancroft*’s position. Their sound profile wouldn’t look like the ocean floor. It was closer to rock, but it wouldn’t sound or appear the same to a sonar operator. Especially with the different material making up their articulating spine. It wasn’t a consistent spike like most submarines bounced back.

After they held their position for ten minutes, she broke the tension over the boat-wide transmitter. “We’re going to phase two. Deploy the minnows.”

There should be enough room to open the rear launch hatches to drop their mini-submersibles, or as she lovingly called them, minnows. They were connected with impossibly thin and strong

fiber-optic cables that allowed them to maintain a connection to the *Bancroft* and to explore the surrounding space. She was planning to use them to scope out the terrain down the Trench wall and to leave a few anti-submarine gifts behind for their friends, in case things went pear-shaped.

“Keep me promptly informed if any new bogies appear or if the situation changes,” she whispered to Müller.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Kel pushed off the pole. She hadn’t realized how hard she’d been gripping it until she let go. Her fingers tingled as she squeezed and unsqueezed her hand, trying to shake loose the stinging pricks of nerve compression.

As she shook the blood into circulation, she quietly headed toward her ready room. It wasn’t worth risking making a noise by walking through the boat, but she needed to talk to Marín in private. She could connect to her directly from there.

They had to find a way to get a message to AAFEUS Command without giving away their position.

The Brig



K displayed by the ingent minnow had her ready room awash in the cold glow of the screen. The scans were using a top-secret, close-range LiDAR system that wasn't detectable unless you were within twenty-five meters of the submersible. By that point, you probably knew they were there. The system had been designed for operating in deep water to aid in finding the ever-changing cave pockets of valuable biomass.

They'd been doing the mapping runs every eight hours for nearly a week. That is, since Marín modified a minnow to ferry a one-way, supercavitating torpedo away from the *Bancroft*. The minnow had a tethered range of one kilometer. It was programmed to disconnect and enter a fully autonomous mode for another ten kilometers. When it reached its target, it dropped the torpedo, and about an hour later, the robotic boat returned to the *Bancroft*. Soon afterward, the torpedo fired. This particular munition wasn't designed to explode; its mission, instead, was to get as close as possible in the shortest amount of time to the FISUS array near Guam before broadcasting the intel it had collected. After that, they configured the torpedo to self-destruct unless the array echoed back commands to float to the bottom.

Judging by the chaos that broke out in the submarine formation after the torpedo went supersonic, the Chinese and Russian alliance was tenuous at best. Before they launched the messenger, the two

allies intermingled their submersibles throughout the Trench. They shared patrol routes around a wide perimeter and over a multitude of depths circling the Alpha point. Afterward, however, they bunched up along country boundaries. The only unknown allegiances were the unidentified submersibles far below, and they had not heard from those since the active sonar pings on day one.

“Are we absolutely certain these tunnels can accommodate the *Bancroft*?” Kel eyed Larsson and Hinault. XO Collins was standing in his usual arms-crossed posture, leaning against the wall. Beside him stood Oscar.

Her ready room was the safest place on board to have a conversation. With multiple layers of audio dampening, it would prevent everything short of a rock band practicing inside from being detected.

Hinault answered her. “Once we get past the cave entrance, the first chamber is quite cavernous. We could easily fit four submersibles in there.” He tapped her LCD and brought up a simulated model of the *Bancroft* in the mapped cave. There was just as much room as he’d said, and you could easily turn around those mammoth US Virginia-class submarines inside.

She fixed her gaze on Larsson. “And we can navigate down there undetected?”

“If we make—” Larsson began.

“I don’t understand why we need to move deeper,” Collins interrupted. “We’ve been here beside this rock formation for a while and haven’t been detected. There’s no telling what we’re going to run into inside that cavern.”

She turned back toward him and shook her head. It was one thing to ask questions to ensure all their bases were covered, but it was another to question her decisions at every turn. “Did you even peruse Müller’s CIS report? The alterations in their movements and communications suggest a shift in patrol patterns. They’re employing a randomized search grid, even around our depth. It’s only a matter of time before we’re found. The closer we get to the

Alpha point, the better.”

Hinault shifted uncomfortably in place.

Collins leaned off the wall. “We can’t know for certain how their patrol patterns will change.”

“I refuse to sit idle and await detection, nor will I question the expertise of my communications specialists,” Kel began. “The less we trust each other in situations like this, the more likely we are to make a mistake. Now, back to the cave.”

She returned her attention to Larsson and nodded. “Continue.”

He stared at her for a second before slowly returning his attention to the screens. “We’ll need to trickle flush the bottom bubble injectors with water to remove any sediment we’ve picked up. The boat should be fine down there. There’s an undercurrent circulating near the Trench, so the silt shouldn’t give away our position. It’ll cloud up for about two hundred meters, but the water will clear rapidly. As long as we take it slow and don’t cause a ruckus, we should be able to drop without a problem. Getting inside, now that’ll require a bit more work. The pump-jet drive can handle it, though. She’s whisper quiet at these temperatures, and I’ll take my time.”

Relocating the *Bancroft* wasn’t ideal, but ever since Müller ran their patrol routes and comm signals through their strategy expert system, the mysterious computer had been spitting out all kinds of warnings. Their patrol pattern changes were subtle. The outcome, however, wasn’t. The system gave them a sixty percent chance of being discovered within another week. That was fifty-nine points higher than she was comfortable with.

Her son Henry was into machine learning and quantum generative intelligence. He’d been working on his PhD in computer science, specializing in intelligent systems capable of translating ancient undeciphered texts from Egypt and the Indus Valley. It was crazy how accurate the computer programs had become in the last few decades since A.I. hit the mainstream. With the boundless budget of the military, she wasn’t about to second guess their

hardware. Least of all in the heat of the moment.

She tapped the screen and brought up the cave network they'd uncovered. "How deep have we explored inside?"

"About half a klick," Hinault began, eyeing Collins. His gaze was almost fearful. "We treaded carefully and wanted to be certain we weren't backing into a trap. Plus, it's always good to know your neighbors."

When she panned around the web of tunnels, she shook her head. "These things go on forever. Is there any chance they connect to the Alpha caves?"

Hinault scratched his five o'clock shadow. "I'm sure they could, but it's kilometers below that position. It could take months to find our way through this labyrinth. Should I set up a search grid, ma'am?"

She raised her hand. "No, no. I was just wondering. I don't understand why we haven't found these tunnels before now. They're not exactly few and far between. With the tectonic stability of the Trench, these caves could've been around for thousands of years."

Hinault brought up some pictures of the cave walls. They were pretty much solid rock with larger and larger pockets of sand and soil the deeper you got. It was in one of those deeper chambers that they had discovered the biomass.

He tweaked the display and a heat map of the water appeared. There was a stream of warm water flowing up and out of the tunnel itself. "With the heating and cooling of the oceans mirroring the climate changes above the surface, the rocks throughout the ocean contract and expand in kind. The same effect happens for those within the Mariana Trench as well. Since the '30s, it's gotten worse every year."

"I know the backstory." She rubbed her temple. "It's just the sheer size and number of tunnels is... mind-numbing. This main cavern looks like it goes on for kilometers."

"This oceanography lesson is a waste of time. Are we certain this

little excursion of yours is worth the risk, ma'am?" Collins asked. He was studying her response.

Kel took a deep breath and stared him in the face. She couldn't go any longer with Collins as her XO if he wasn't up for it. "Hinault, Larsson. If you'd give us a minute, we need to have a one-on-one conversation." She pointed toward her private quarters off her ready room.

"Ma'am?" Hinault asked, eyeing her door.

She gestured with the back of her hand toward the inner hatch. "It's ok. There's nothing in there that'll bite you."

He glanced from her to the XO and then Oscar, who hadn't said a word the entire conversation.

"Go on, sailor," Oscar said. "We'll call you back in a moment."

Hinault tentatively unlatched the hatch and peered in before stepping inside. Larsson was close behind.

When the hatch clicked shut, she spun around to face Collins. "Have you got a problem with me, Thomas?" She lifted her hand over her head, and he flinched. "I've had it up to here with you undermining my command in front of my crew."

"Our crew," he said, straightening his back.

She leaned forward, jabbing her finger in his chest. "No! My crew! You're along for the ride until they finish rehabbing the HMS *Vanguard* with my pump-jet drive. That's a boat more your speed. I'll ask you this, plain and simple. Are you willing to serve as my XO or not?"

Collins froze, glancing over her shoulder at the network of caves on the LCD before speaking. "It depends. Are you going to continue to treat this like an episode of National Geographic, or are you going to command it as a naval mission?"

She chuckled. "The tactics of warfare are changing with the technology, Thomas. You may not agree with them nor comprehend them, but that's fine. You can ride it out as a CO of the *Vanguard*. They won't be expecting anything non-traditional from you while you're captain of that boat."

“Bugger off, Kel.” He shifted his posture, leaning slightly toward her. “Your kind should be in an underwater lab, not commanding a military vessel.”

“My kind!” She shoved him into the corner and brought her elbow up to his neck. “You have a problem with a woman in command, do you?”

“Alright, you two!” Oscar stepped forward and pulled at her arm, struggling to remove it from Collins’ windpipe.

She’d wedged it below his chin and was leaning in with all her weight. Men like him had been questioning her abilities her entire career. If she hadn’t come to the table with a technological gift in hand, she knew she wouldn’t be in command of this submersible, but she didn’t care. Maybe that was why Admiral Ellis had requested Collins be her XO. He, too, wanted to replace her and was looking for every opportunity to challenge her leadership.

“I... wasn’t... saying that.” Collins was struggling to speak. “I meant... scientists.”

Shoving off against his throat, she swung her free hand up and socked him in the stomach. He keeled over and dropped to his knees while grabbing at his neck.

“You are hereby relieved of your duties.” She leaned down and ripped off his XO insignia before reaching over and opening the door to her quarters. “Larsson, Hinault!” The hatch swung open without a sound. “Escort Mr. Collins to the brig. Lock him up and place him under guard until further notice. Is that understood?”

Collins struggled to clear his throat as he continued to rub his neck.

The two sailors stared wide-eyed at their former XO, gasping on his knees in front of them. They were like deer caught in headlights, unsure of what to do.

“Hinault!” Oscar said.

He looked up and made eye contact with the Bull Nuke. “Yes... yessir.”

Oscar walked closer to the entrance of her quarters. “You and

our good pilot here are going to escort Commander Collins to the brig and then return to your CO immediately. Is that clear?"

Hinault swallowed hard and then saluted him. "Yessir!" He did the same to Kel before squeezing past Oscar and reaching down to pull Collins off the ground.

"Don't touch me!" Collins said. "I'll get up myself." He pushed himself up from the floor and smoothed out the creases in his shirt. Once it was straight, he turned and glared at Kel. "You're going to regret this."

Kel smiled. "I regretted it the moment they assigned you to my boat. No... this, I'm fine with. I have lives to protect and a mission to perform. We're like oil and water, Thomas. We should never have been forced to work together." She turned toward Hinault and nodded. "You can take him away."

Without a word, Larsson stepped around the four of them and opened the hatch to the hall. He then strode through and stood with his back to the bridge, attempting to block anyone from seeing.

Collins exited next, followed by Hinault. They made their way aft and down a level toward the brig. It wasn't so much a brig as it was the corner of a storage room with pipes fit for handcuffs, leg shackles, and a blanket. There wasn't enough space, nor was there much use for a brig on a submarine.

When Oscar leaned forward, he pulled the hatch closed and checked that it was sealed before turning to face her. His cheeks were red. "What the hell was that about?"

She recoiled. "Excuse me?" The last person she'd expected to oppose her actions was him. They had too much history.

Oscar wiped his forehead with his palm. "Sorry, but Kel... you can't be throwing your XO in the brig like that. Not in the middle of a conflict. The crew's already on edge."

"He's been undermining my command since we boarded. I'm done! I can't be the CO of this boat with an XO like that. Would you rather he was in charge or me?"

He tilted his head. "Come on. You know the answer to that. I'm

just saying, the shit's hitting the fan out there, and the more stable the crew's command structure is, the higher the probability we'll survive."

She nodded. "Good. I'm glad you see it that way." She reached into her pocket and pulled out the XO insignias, holding them out in her palm in front of him. "I'd be honored if you'd be my XO."

His jaw fell open.

"Aww, come on." She pushed them closer to him. "You earned these years ago. If it weren't for your last CO being a nepotistic tool, promoting his son through the ranks, you'd have been an XO for a decade."

He carefully picked them out of her hand, staring at them the entire time. "I... never imagined it would happen like this." He looked up into her eyes. "I've only got four years before I retire."

"Well, good. And congratulations." She smiled and patted him on the shoulder. "Thank you for the notice. I'll be on the lookout for a rising lieutenant commander if we return to port after this duty."

He raised his index finger. "When... we return to port, you mean. I won't have my CO speaking like that around the sailors." He smirked and returned his gaze to the insignias in his hand.

She chuckled. "Yes, *when* we return to port. Worst case, we can wait them out if we have to. We're stocked for a long haul. We could last over six months if we ration our supplies. Besides, I'm not keen on engaging an ocean full of bull sharks, even if we're a great white."

"I wouldn't suggest rationing just yet." Oscar leaned back against the wall, and the insignias made a quiet metal clink in his hand as he turned them over. "The crew is stressed out running silent. Taking away their food will only push them over the edge."

The lights overhead flashed. Someone was outside the door and wanted in.

"Can I put these on later?" Oscar asked.

She nodded. "Sure. Whenever you're ready."

He pocketed the pins.

Kel reached out and unlocked the hatch, pushing it open. Larsson and Hinault were both standing side by side in the hall. Their faces were masks of guilt. Like they'd just endured shooting their favorite horse with the broken leg.

Hinault saluted her. "XO... I mean, Lieutenant Commander Collins has been detained below. We asked Doc Hansen to stand guard until we can set up a rotation with security."

She smirked. Ellen was as put off by Collins as she was. "I bet she wasn't too heartbroken about that?"

"No, ma'am, she wasn't," Larsson said, barely containing a smile.

"Very well then." She rubbed her hands together. "We have a boat to move, dolphins. Shall we?"

Interlude

The Builders

Helios shot up from his seat, a spasm of indignation in his eyes. “This is absurd. That female’s prejudice is blatant—she dismissed him without a second thought.” His hand instinctively reached for the globe before hesitancy took hold; withdrawing it, he rubbed his fingers together, as if the memory of past consequences lingered on his skin.

Willow crossed her arms. “That female’s name is Captain Kel Williams, and you haven’t seen the full extent of that officer’s insubordination. That was the mere tip of the iceberg. Besides, you have to admit, he was being a bit of a twat.”

He glanced over at her. “A tw—at? What ever is that?”

She shook her head. “Nothing.” She’d spent far too much time studying and pruning her human subjects. Now she was using their infernal slang. If she had any hope of getting the Builders on her side, she needed to act more like them. She needed to elevate her level of elitism.

Willow reached out and tweaked the display, bringing up a small portal showing Collins. He was pacing back and forth in a tiny room, barely two meters square. It was hardly a brig, but it worked.

She turned to face Helios and noticed his back was to her. His bright white tunic and fiery hair seemed to move as if they had minds of their own. As she leaned forward, she swore she heard him mumbling to himself. If only his tunic weren’t rustling so loudly, she might have been able to make out his words.

“Tell me,” Willow began, returning her attention to the portal of Collins. “If Captain Williams had questioned your command during the Battle of Phlegra, how—”

“She’d be dead!” Helios spun around, his eyes blazing like twin suns. “A human does not question a Builder. You, of all people, should know that.”

His sudden heated motion sent a burst of flames off his flowing head of hair. Had her chamber not been designed to handle such godly outbursts, it would certainly have caught fire.

“Now, now,” she muttered, suppressing a smile and keeping her eyes on the portal. She could feel his presence beside her, a warm and familiar energy that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. Even without looking, she knew he was studying her every move. “While she may not be a god, you can’t blame her for jailing him, can you?”

“I... suppose not.” He stepped back up to her side and dismissed the portal she’d opened, revealing Kel’s timeline floating beneath it.

She drew in her breath. He shouldn’t have been able to do that. Not unless he retained some influence over this fragment. But that shouldn’t be possible. Not with the protections she had in place.

“Come now.” He nodded toward the portal. “Let’s continue watching this... this,” he waved his hand, “human catastrophe unfold.” He shifted his gaze to her.

When his eyes met hers, something deep within her soul recoiled and cringed into the shadows. He wasn’t just here to check on her. No, he was here to stop her. Whatever was going on in this fragment, he was none too happy about it.

Willow swallowed hard and turned her attention back to the timeline still playing out in front of them. With her mind reeling over the implications of Helios’ interest in her experiment, she waved her hand and leaned forward, sharpening her view of Kel’s perspective.

Waffles



Bubble injectors moved more slowly than they'd planned. Rather than rush the job and cause a massive cloud of sand that could give away their location, he took a far more conservative route to gradually clear the particulates. He reused the water they were flushing through the system to rinse off any muck that might have built up around their hull. Fortunately, they were lying on only a few meters of sand. Beneath that was solid rock.

This gave everyone involved in the operation enough time for some shut-eye, even Kel. Not that she slept much. With all the balls they were juggling, including a former XO in the brig and a few dozen piranhas circling overhead, she couldn't shut off her thoughts and enjoy the quiet darkness of her quarters. Her wandering and worrying mind was a problem she'd dealt with her entire life.

Part of her hoped AAFEUS would drop an encrypted message buoy or send some type of signal saying what they were doing. Admiral Ellis had made it clear how important this target was, but she couldn't help feeling like they were being left to fend for themselves on the bottom of the ocean. She knew it was the grogginess playing tricks on her as she wandered in circles near the edge of sleep. That realization, however, didn't prevent the nagging concerns simmering in the back of her mind from gaining a bigger foothold and a bit more momentum.

She pushed up off her bunk and reached out to turn on the

lights. They came up to a dim glow, giving the room a somber feeling. “It was a one-way message, stupid. They shan’t reveal their hand until necessity demands it.”

There was no one to reply but her subconscious. On a positive note, that part of her psyche wasn’t yet responding.

Her quarters were tiny. It had enough space for a bunk to be pulled flat, or when propped up, she could use a fold-down desk. Finally, on the far end, she had a pocket alcove for her own toilet, which also doubled as a shower. You just had to be careful not to slip and hit your head on the loo.

As she pushed to stand up, she cringed at her stench. If she could smell herself, then others could as well. It’d been over a week since she last showered. There was too much to do and not enough time. Her layers of clothing came off quickly, and she tossed them into a laundry bag. She’d bring them with her when she was done. A quick tour of the boat was in order this morning before they got underway.

After she stepped into the meager closet and slid the door closed, she made sure the lid was down on the loo. When she was happy she wasn’t going to flood the septic system, she turned on the water.

Every dolphin knew showers on a submarine were short, and hers was no exception, though she was allowed twice as much water as the rest of the crew. She hastily spun around in the downpour and ran her hands through her hair, counting down in her head from twenty to zero before the spray shut off. When it did, she reached for the soap and lathered her body up and down, applying the shampoo last. Once she was cleanish, she hit the button again. This time, she was allotted thirty seconds to rinse off. Having short hair made this part easy, but reaching all the other spots without hitting your knee in the confined closet was challenging. When she’d bumped it a few months back, she spent the entire day limping through the boat. This morning she had five seconds to spare and could actually let the water flow over her

shoulders. The feeling verged on luxurious, an unfamiliar sensation on a submarine.

With the water gone, she dried off and tossed the washcloth-sized towel into the laundry bag with her dirty clothes. She then put on some deodorant and got dressed in her second uniform. Life on a boat was simple. The frills and nonessentials of the mainland were a distant memory underwater. It was this simplistic lifestyle that she loved the most.

She turned in place and adjusted her sheet and blankets. Even though people rarely came into her quarters, once a sailor, always a sailor. Dolphins never left their bunks in disarray. While she didn't care to bounce a coin off it like back in basic training, she still ran a tight ship.

When her military habits leaked into personal life, it used to drive her ex-husband, Joel, crazy. Many a fight started first thing in the morning over his post-sleep hygiene and lazy bedding rituals. Rumor had it his bunk on board the USS *Walrus* was a model of disarray, much like their marriage had been.

"Rank has its privileges," she said aloud, shaking her head. It was something he used to say to excuse away his laziness.

While she wasn't looking forward to being under his command, she had to admit that seeing his face again would be nice. It'd been a few years, and the last time she saw him, he was getting that dusty, dignified gray like his father had. She'd always found that look sexy.

Kel shook the tingles out of her arms and legs, staring at her face in the mirror. "Keep your panties on, CO. You've got a crew to keep alive."

She reached over and grabbed the bag before stepping out of her quarters, closing the hatch to her bunk and her ready room as she went. When she hit the hall, she turned right and worked her way through the bridge. The second shift was still manning their stations. In another half hour, they'd be rotating and beginning the next leg of their mission.

“CO on the deck,” Müller said, announcing her presence on the bridge, but keeping her focus on her screens, so as not to miss anything.

“At ease,” she said, walking up behind Müller and tapping her on the shoulder. “I trust you managed some shut-eye and haven’t been vigilant all night. We need you in top form once we’re underway.”

“I did, ma’am.” Müller glanced up at her and smiled before returning her attention to her station. “I woke up before my alarm, and since I wasn’t counting sheep, I figured an early peek at the previous shift’s logs before we got going couldn’t hurt.”

“Ditto that. Rest eluded me as well.” Kel squinted, studying Müller’s controls. “Anything interesting?”

Müller moved her finger over her display. “Still no movement from our friends down by Alpha point, but the patrol boats above us are closing in their circle. They’re spiraling inward faster than estimated. If we don’t move, we’ll be in their tightening path in... two days.”

There was that itch again. Whenever Kel doubted someone’s words, her nose tickled. Partially because she was calling bullshit, and also as a nervous twitch. For years, she hadn’t noticed the tic until one day Oscar called her on it while they were playing poker. It was a friendly game, and her pilot at the time was trying to show off. He was telling everyone what their cards were when she scratched her nose. Oscar read it as a tell that her hand was better than he’d estimated, whereas she saw it as far more. It was her rubbish detector.

“I don’t like the sound of that.” She tapped her palm against the bar behind Müller’s chair.

She tweaked her display and fast-forwarded a few hours, showing Kel where the enemy boats would be in the future. “We have time, ma’am. We’ll be underway in an hour.”

Kel scratched her nose and masked the motion by rubbing her cheek. “Let’s cut that in half. Get shift one in here early.”

“Ma’am?” Müller glanced over her shoulder at Kel.

“You heard me.” She tapped the back of Müller’s chair. This time her nails made a dull clicking sound against the composite material. “I want to be underway in thirty. Rustle the next shift. I’ll be ready to move out in a few minutes.” She raised her laundry bag, and Müller nodded.

As she turned to go, she could barely hear Müller whispering into her microphone, getting the nearest sailors to the crew quarters to wake the others. Kel exited the bridge toward the bow, twisted to port, grasped the ladder holding her bag in her right hand, and stepped down the rungs. She was doing everything she could not to make any noise. If there was one thing she hated about being a dolphin, it was living while running silent.

After she reached the bottom and turned aft, she passed through the laundry and carefully set her bag in the awaiting bin. They allowed each crew member one laundering per month, which ensured showers weren’t taken too often. It didn’t matter, though, as they wouldn’t be cleaning clothes for a while in their current situation.

A few more compartments later, she entered the galley, and the aroma of waffles and coffee hit her like a brick wall. Her stomach rumbled instantly. The sound reminded her of a foghorn. She hadn’t even realized she was hungry, but the circular disks of golden crisp cake batter smelled wonderful. Gianna, their chef, was a miracle worker underwater. Kel didn’t know how she did it, but her meals were heavenly every day.

She paused inside the hatch and took a deep breath. “That smells amazing, G.”

“Oh, shoot. Sorry, Captain.” She brushed her hands on her apron and went to salute her. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Stop that.” Kel waved her hand away. “You’re gonna burn that beauty if you’re not watching it. I call dibs.” She reached out and grabbed a fork and a plate, waiting at the counter for the golden disk to pop.

Running silent made cooking and baking harder than normal. No audible alarms could go off, and no noisy equipment could be used to open the multitude of canned goods you cooked with. That meant a whole lot of manual cranking to free the contents from the cans, while smoke and smells were your only way of knowing when things were done.

“So, when ya think we be joinin’ the parade of submersibles?” Gianna turned her head and glanced at Kel before returning her focus back to the wisps of smoke coming off the waffle maker.

Kel had served with Gianna for more years than she could remember. She and Oscar were the few people still in the service from her original boat. Lying to her after countless late-night hours talking about life simply wasn’t in the cards. With the galley empty, telling the truth was easier than not.

“I don’t know,” Kel said. “It hinges on if we can find a path out of here that won’t risk our lives or the lives of the other boats heading our way.”

Gianna flipped the waffle maker open and used her tongs to extract the golden, delicious goodness. She then gently laid it onto Kel’s plate and slid the maple syrup and butter down the counter for her to use.

“I take it by your silence...” Kel slathered an unhealthy portion of butter in the nooks of the waffle and then squeezed the syrup. “That you have something to say to me about our neighbors out there in the other boats.”

A smile eased across Gianna’s face. “You knows me too well, my lady. But it’s not so much about the boats, as about your people.”

Kel froze, the first chunk of waffle lingering centimeters from her mouth. “That sounds ominous. Care to elaborate?” She squinted at her friend. “It’s about Collins, isn’t it? I’ve got like fifteen minutes before I need to be on the bridge.”

Gianna ladled out another helping of waffle mix into the maker and then closed the lid, flipping it over to start the cook. “It’s not about Crabby Collins.” She drew in a breath before replying. “Your

people... they're not keen on playing second fiddle to the Americans. Not when we're clearly the dominant boat beneath the waves." She flipped the waffle over and peeked inside before shutting it and flipping it back. "They think you should be the one leading this mission."

She chewed the bite and swallowed hard, forking another mouthful. The crunch of her teeth against the waffle was music to her ears—and her stomach—almost as much as hearing she had the trust of her crew. She couldn't blame them for feeling the way they did because she felt the same way herself. Every day since that uplink, she wondered why Admiral Ellis asked her to take the second seat beside the Americans. It didn't add up. But in the end, she had her orders and was planning to follow them.

"I really do appreciate the vote of confidence," she said between bites. "While I agree with the crew, orders are orders. I'm not about to question command on our maiden voyage, especially with the stakes this high. Besides, rendezvousing is impractical until we find an open route to escape this netting we're entangled in. If you can remind them of that, it might help." She forked another bite into her mouth and checked her watch. Müller was expecting her on the bridge soon.

"For sure." Gianna flipped the waffle over and lifted the lid again. Another golden-brown batch was ready for the heating station. "I understand our situation is far from ideal. If the crew had been on a few more tours with you and the *Bancroft*, I'm sure they would, as well."

When Kel pulled out her command tablet, she held it up against the sync dock on one of the dining tables. It downloaded all the latest details from the central computer without stray broadcasts bouncing around the boat and possibly giving away their position. She checked the active shift roster and saw that Larsson and Hinault were already at their stations. Oscar was still in Engineering, and if she knew him, he wouldn't have put on his XO insignias yet. Heck, he might not even come up to the bridge. She wouldn't push him.

Not until she had to.

As she shoveled in the last bite, her conscience nagged at her. "Could you prepare another waffle for—"

Gianna slid a lidded container toward her, along with a side of syrup. "I'm already ahead of you. Collins isn't keen on butter."

Kel tilted her head. "How'd you know I was gonna ask for him?"

"Because you're not nearly the cold-hearted shrew you think you are." Gianna smirked and ladled another batch of mix into the waffle maker. "You forget how long we've been together, my liege."

She glanced around the galley to ensure it was still vacant before leaning over and nudging her shoulder. "You gotta stop calling me that."

"Oh, come on." Gianna closed the lid and spun the maker over. "No one will be down here for another twenty minutes until just before the shift change. The crew has been grabbing as much shut-eye as possible. Besides, you can try your damndest to forget about that renaissance festival last summer, but I can't." She leaned forward and started laughing. "That bloody queen dress the old crew convinced you to wear was priceless."

"You're wicked!" She hip-checked her chef and snatched the container and coffees. "I was drunk, and you vowed not to mention that afternoon ever again." She turned to leave.

"No." Gianna adjusted the lid of the heating units. "You made me promise. I merely nodded and took a few more pictures."

Kel froze at the exit hatch. "And those will—"

"Never see the light of day," Gianna interrupted with a wink. "At least not until after I retire."

She shook her head and chuckled before continuing aftward, toward where they were holding Collins. Retirement seemed like a foreign concept to her. She'd finally achieved her dream with this submersible. To think about walking away from it before she pushed it to its limits wasn't in the cards.

The hatches along her path were open except for the final one. A sailor was standing in front of it, his eyes following her as she

approached.

When she stepped into his compartment, he saluted her and stared down the corridor. "Captain."

She nodded at him. His name was Floyd, if she remembered correctly. He was another trainee, an oxygen thief who worked in the bowels of the boat. "At ease. Has our friend in confinement made any commotion?"

"No, ma'am." He returned to a casual stance, placing his arms behind his back. "Not a peep during my shift. I checked on him every hour, and he never moved once. He's been facing away from the door the entire time."

That was about what she expected, but you never knew how someone would react to being placed under arrest. Especially one of the former leaders of a warship. It could have gone either way. He had a penchant for dramatic speeches and a short temper.

"Well," she dipped her head at her hands full of food and drinks. "I've come bearing sustenance. If you'd..."

"Oh, crap," Floyd stumbled forward, lurching for the latch handle. "I'm so sorry, ma'am. My manners are drowning. My mum would be kicking my bum right about now if she were here." He slid the lever toward the open mark, careful not to slam it and make any noise. He then grabbed the handle and pulled.

"No worries," she muttered. "We can all get preoccupied with our thoughts down here." She glanced at him and smiled. "Let's just be sure we're sharp when we need to be."

His eyes went wide. "Yes, ma'am! Of course."

The hatch swung open, and lying inside was Collins, exactly as the dolphin had described. He had his back to the door and his arms were crossed over his chest.

"Have you come to your senses?" Collins' voice sounded muted facing the wall.

She stepped into the cramped space of the makeshift brig. "If by senses you mean I come bearing breakfast, then yeah." She bent down and slid the container with the waffle and syrup next to his

bed and plucked a coffee out of the holder, setting it down beside the dish.

“Are you seriously doing this now, Kel? I know we haven’t always seen eye to eye, but—”

“You cursed at me in front of members of the crew, and questioned me and my kind being fit to command this boat during an international conflict. And let’s not forget about your episode last week en route to the Trench. You had a chip on your shoulder with that Chinese beacon we dismantled, and you almost sank us.”

Her back straightened as he shifted around to face her, moaning several times in the process. The chains on his wrists and legs jingled the entire time. Once he was facing her, she continued. “People have been killed for less in the past, a fact you’re well aware of. We’re in the midst of a world conflict, and the last thing I need is your sexist, colonial ego and the continent-size chip on your shoulder jockeying for attention.”

He stared down at the plate of food and then back at her before rubbing his head with his hands. The sound of his stomach growling echoed through the cramped storage room, even over the clanging of the chains. On any other day, every space in the room would be crammed with canned goods for the crew meals. Gianna and her team had pulled from this stockpile first, and they had cleared a few of the remaining crates still in the way to make accommodations for Collins’ cell. The rest were out of his reach and held in place with floor-to-ceiling netting.

“So, that’s it.” He leaned back against the bulkhead. “My career ended with my goddamn foot in my mouth. My family is going to...” His voice trailed off.

She checked her watch. She was due on the bridge soon. When she glanced up at Collins, he was wiping away tears from his eyes. He reached down and grabbed the waffle container, lifting off the lid. The smell of the breakfast delicacy wafted through the confined space.

“Why don’t you ever show your human side to the crew?” She

leaned against the hatch frame.

“What? And cry my eyes out in front of them?” He poured the syrup over the cooling, crispy cake, shaking his head the entire time. “No. They need a pillar of strength on the bridge. Not a sniveling weak-ass captain.”

“See, that’s what I’m talking about.” She motioned in the air. “Your mindset is outdated. Commanding a vessel doesn’t necessitate a tough exterior towards your crew.”

He nodded and forked a chunk of waffle into his mouth. “I know. I have to admit, though, it’s tough... being your XO. You have a history of railroading your second in command, so when I stepped into this role, I—”

“What do you mean, railroading?” She pushed off the wall.

“It’s what Fleet Admiral Ellis warned me about.” He cut off another chunk of waffle and paused, staring at it. “You think a lot, and you keep most of your ideas to yourself. And then...” He took the bite and chewed it while continuing, seeming to struggle not to add any rancor to his words. “You push hard to hurry up and make decisions, but you forget you’ve internalized everything and had far longer than anyone else to mull over the options. Most of the time you’re right, but your crew hasn’t thought about it to the level of detail you have. Anyhow, it’s water under the bridge. There’s not a chance Ellis will let me command a sub after this. If I can’t handle working with you, he’ll ship me up port to languish at a desk for the rest of my years with the navy.”

No one had ever mentioned that issue to her before. Certainly, if people thought that way, they would have brought it to her attention. She was no different from any other female in the military. Women had to prove themselves four times as competent as any man to be taken seriously. That meant a lot of thinking without the luxury of showing too many feelings. Besides, she was the person giving him advice on being softer. Not the other way around. And even if he was right, that didn’t excuse his demeaning her in front of the crew.

He sealed the empty container and reached for the coffee. "You should be getting on. From the sounds of the bubbler outside this wall, you're prepping to move out."

She tilted her head.

"Keep us safe, Captain." He took a sip and closed his eyes, visibly enjoying the shot of caffeine, before he opened them again. "The crew needs you to be on top of your game. We don't get any second chances. Not at these depths."

"Thanks." She reached down and picked up the container. "The *Bancroft* has some tricks up his sleeve, and the crew is coming together. We can handle this. And, Thomas..."

He glanced up at her. "Ma'am?"

"I still haven't made up my mind if I will report this to Admiral Ellis. While you and I may not see eye to eye, that doesn't mean I'll toss you to the bloody sharks. Not after all you've done for your country. You're a product of the system and aren't inherently a bad actor. Just keep your head up until we get out of this, and maybe I'll reinstate you." She stared down at the container and turned, pausing for a brief second before exiting. "The crew has immense respect for you. Your manner irks them, but... they know you mean well."

She pressed the button beside the door to flash the light on the opposite side. Normally, this would warn someone to prevent the collision of the hatch swinging out, but this time, it acted as a means to get the guard's attention. The metal door swung open a moment later and Floyd was waiting for her.

"Thank you," Collins said.

Kel paused and handed the empty container to Floyd. He reached out and took it from her and didn't say a word. She thought for a second about saying something to them, but decided against it. Her mind was already on the bridge.

Dive, Dive, Dive!



Beneath the already assembled. From the looks on their faces, the early dive had already skewed them. From the looks on their faces, the early wake-up had put them on edge. They were certainly more fidgety than usual at their controls and weren't their typical chatty selves following a shift change. Kel came up beside Müller and handed her a coffee.

She recoiled in surprise. "Thank you, ma'am."

Kel smiled. "You mightn't have ample time to savor it, but caffeine remains caffeine."

"Amen." Müller pried off the lid and tilted the steaming, dark black liquid back. Within a few seconds, the cup was empty.

"My heavens!" Kel shook her head, and her eyes went wide. "Did you even attempt to taste it?"

Müller's face turned red. "Yes, ma'am. I believe it was the Tamuka Zimbabwe blend we picked up before shipping out. It was only two shots. Gianna knows my preferences."

Kel took a swig from her cup and then stowed it in the holder beside her chair. "I should have suspected it was an espresso. You continentals seem to lack an appreciation for a quality drip coffee."

"If we wanted to sip something, we'd drink tea," Hinault said. "We outlawed drip coffee after Brexit one point zero." He eyed her with a smirk before returning his focus to his defense screen.

"Tea is but a paltry imitation of coffee." She walked up behind Larsson. "Are we prepared for this undertaking, Coxswain?"

“Except for your blasphemous comments about tea, yes, ma’am.” Larsson reached out and adjusted his display, mirroring it on the larger wall of LCD panels lining the bridge. “We’re ready. I leveled the boat ten meters off the seabed, and all compartments are reporting back green.”

Kel studied the tactical display. The ring of boats on the surface and the submersibles below them had closed the virtual noose even tighter around the *Bancroft*’s neck. Their defensive AI models had predicted this would’ve happened more slowly. She never trusted a computer model unless she knew who’d designed it.

“So much for a two-day grace period.” She eyed Müller.

“I know, right?” Müller updated the model on the wall screen. “It’s almost like they...” She didn’t finish the thought.

Her CIS finishing the sentence wouldn’t change anything. They were already committed to the plan. “Rig for dive!” Kel announced over the boat-wide channel.

“Engine room, rig for dive, aye,” Klein said.

“Forward weapons room, rig for dive, aye,” Marín said.

The rest of the compartments sounded off one at a time. As the last station checked in, the screeching hiss of a cat echoed through the space and over the boat-wide channel. Muted laughter permeated the bridge, and she suppressed a chuckle of her own.

“Tell me...” She clasped her hands behind her back. “Has someone ensured Toby is secured?”

It was essential to execute this maneuver flawlessly, so if the team needed to vent some stress, she’d give them some latitude.

Hinault ducked down and looked under his chair and those near him, struggling to find the source of the noise. “There ain’t no blasted cat on the bridge. You people are crazy.” He returned his attention to his displays.

“It appears our aspiring warfare officer has volunteered to tend to Toby during his next shift.” She walked up behind him and rested her hand on his shoulder.

He flinched, staring forward as chuckles and ayes escaped from

his fellow officers.

Enough goofing off. It was time, and they needed to focus. “Silence on the bridge.” She pressed the button for the boat-wide comm. “Silence on the line.”

The *Bancroft* fell silent, and the only noise was the tapping of the touchscreens around her.

When she stepped back to Larsson’s station, he’d already prepared for her orders. “Coxswain, take us down slow. Comms, deploy our listening gear.”

“Deploy listening gear, aye,” Hinault said.

“Taking us down slow, aye.” Larsson engaged the pump-jet drive and eased the *Bancroft* out over the edge of the Mariana Trench wall. Once they were clear of the rocks, he initiated the spine articulation. The boat noiselessly transformed into its secret spiral formation, adjusting the two dozen spines along its length inward, and angled downward for the dive.

“Diving at wun ze-ro degrees,” he said. “All ahead wun fi-yiv percent.”

They were taking this dive far slower than when they’d dropped out of their supercavity. The less potential for noise they made, the better.

Most of the coordinated vocal back and forth required to maneuver older military submersibles had been replaced with electronic controls in the *Bancroft*. Reducing manual dependencies began with the American Virginia-class submarines, and this boat’s design leapfrogged theirs by at least half a century. Fewer crew members were necessary to maintain the boat, but it also meant they were exposed to a greater risk if something went wrong. Their lives were now resting squarely in Larsson’s hands.

She glanced at the depth gauge and watched the numbers tick down meter by meter. Where their first dive seemed to happen in the blink of an eye, this one was set to be a crawl.

They were approaching three thousand one hundred meters.

“Any word from our foreign friends?” she asked.

“No comms above,” Müller began. “Below is still running silent. We haven’t heard from them in almost a week.”

“No changes in motion, ma’am,” Hinault said. “We’ve deployed our listening gear, and we’re not detecting any adjustments in direction or velocity in the fleet.”

The back of her head itched. It could be nothing, but she wanted to cover their six. “How long until we reach the cave entrance?”

Larsson glanced at her before recognizing his mistake. He returned his attention to his controls. “At our current course and speed, a little under an hour, ma’am.”

She nodded. “Warfare, drop some stationary eyes and ears. Have ’em return to our new position in twenty-four hours.”

“Dropping an Echo Drone. Phoning home in too fo-wer hours, aye.” Hinault’s fingers tapped frantically against his panel while he whispered into his mic. He was communicating with the Engineering technicians below deck to prepare an automated submersible.

It was nice not having Collins on the bridge second-guessing her every move. While she would’ve liked to have Oscar at her side, she realized it was going to be hard for him to make the transition to XO mid-mission.

She stepped backward and fished her coffee out of her chair. As she took a sip, the warmth filled her stomach, working to relax her tensing muscles. She hadn’t noticed how cold the bridge was until the liquid gold permeated through her extremities.

When she set down her cup, she reached into the same compartment and grabbed her light jacket. It was paper-thin, but it was enough to hold in her body heat and repel the chilled air from the ventilators keeping all the computers cool.

After she pulled it on, she lifted her coffee and returned to scrutinizing the control panel on the wall. Everything was proceeding as she’d hoped, and all was quiet. Part of her felt it was too quiet, but that was also the part she told to shut up far too often. With the minutes ticking down, she stared incessantly at the

gauges lining the overhead displays.

“Fo-wer seven fi-yiv ze-ro meters,” Larsson said. He’d been announcing their depth every two hundred and fifty meters. Their target was five thousand meters.

“Slow dive speed by half.” Kel stepped up beside Hinault. “I want a minnow out in front of us giving that cave a once-over again.”

“Slow dive speed, aye,” Larsson said. “Diving at wun ze-ro degrees. All ahead seven point fi-yiv percent forward, aye.”

“Should we risk the noise of opening the minnow cavity, ma’am?” Hinault eyed her nervously. “I mean—”

“It’s a fair question,” she interrupted, nodding at the trainee. “Müller, is there any risk of the cavity opening being detected at this depth?”

Müller reached up and ran her right hand through her short-cropped blond hair, finally bringing it down to the cross around her neck and fidgeting with it before she replied. “We dive-tested off the Puerto Rico Trench at six thousand meters. The audible tests were mute above four. There’s a thermocline layer at around six thousand meters, which will help. Without knowing where the bogies are below, they might pick up something. It’s hard to say, ma’am, but I think we should be safe.”

If they’d had more time to run a broader array of checks before their first mission, they wouldn’t be facing this unknown. Opening the cavity at three thousand meters wasn’t a concern, but add another two kilometers of water above your head and everything changed. At these depths, sound was slower, but the risks were greater.

She tapped her fist against her chin. This was when she needed an XO, but she wasn’t about to reach out to Oscar on the other side of the boat.

“Ma’am, should I deploy the minnow?” Hinault asked. His voice doing little to hide his impatience.

“No. It’s not worth the risk.” She pushed off and stepped back to

Larsson's station. "Maintain current course and speed. I trust you've studied that footage meticulously, Coxswain."

"That's affirmative, ma'am." He adjusted the cameras in front of him to bring up the previously recorded feed on the far right. "I spent a few hours last night reviewing Hinault's baby shark feed. Unless something changed in the past day, we should be good to go."

"Shall we pause to reorient before reversing in?" She leaned closer to his display.

"Negatory. There's plenty of room inside the cavern to flip around, and the sound won't travel as far."

She took a deep breath, the cold air chilling her lungs. "It's all you, dolphin."

Larsson brought his cross up to his mouth and kissed it before setting it back against his chest and quietly muttered a few words. All the while, his eyes never left his screen.

They could use all the luck in the world, and if there was a god overlooking them, their help would be nice, as well. While Kel wasn't religious, she supported her crew in every way she could, and Larsson's Bible study group had been packed this past Sunday.

"Approaching fi-yiv thousand meters," Larsson began. "Cave entrance is at fi-yiv wun wun fo-wer meters."

"Retract the listening gear," Kel said.

"Retract the listening gear, aye," Müller said.

The far wall panel updated a moment later with the status showing the tow gear retracting back into the rear of the boat. They'd be a bit more blind, but would be less exposed inside the cave.

As she watched the progress of the cable, it stopped. "What seems to be the complication, Comms?"

Müller tilted her head and put her finger to her open ear. "I'm... picking up something, sir. It... sounds like..." She shook her head. "I'm running it through the system."

Kel slid over to Müller's post. Her CIS was working her magic

against the signal they'd picked up. "What is it?"

The results came up on her controls. It was a perfect match for a supercavitating drive signature. The sound profile wasn't as large as the *Bancroft*, but the audio profile was unmistakable. From the looks of it, the direction it'd been traveling from put it squarely toward mainland China.

Müller glanced up at her without saying a word. "Orders, ma'am."

Sitting out in front of the cave they were hoping to hide in wasn't the best place to be if they started scanning for the *Bancroft* again.

Kel leaned back and peered at the depth gauge. Another fifty meters and they were there. "Continue retracting the gear. We can consider redeployment once safely inside."

"Continue retracting, aye." Müller returned her attention to the controls and issued the command to continue.

"Coming up on the cave system," Larsson began. "Uncoiling and engaging forward thrust to slow our approach."

Kel studied the panel and watched as their audio profile exploded. While they weren't loud by any stretch of the imagination, they were well outside of stealth. The sound shouldn't penetrate either thermocline, but within that range, they were easy targets.

"Forward movement slowed to thuh-ree percent," Larsson said.

The cave entrance and the cliff were rapidly approaching. As she slid down toward Larsson, she reached out and gripped the pole beside his chair to brace for impact. "We're coming in too hot."

He shook his head. "Negatory. We're fine, ma'am."

The safety of the dark cavernous entry loomed ahead.

She recoiled and squeezed the pole with all her might. "All reverse, emergency—"

"Sir!" Larsson interrupted, pointing at his display.

The *Bancroft* was hovering in place. He'd disengaged their forward thrusters, having returned their sound profile to well

within stealth levels.

“By Neptune’s beard, dolphin!” She whacked Larsson on the shoulder. “Next time, bring us in slower. Our lives aren’t pawns in a game down here.”

He seemed to slouch down into his chair. “Yes, ma’am. Sorry, ma’am.”

She wasn’t about to hang out over the Trench and reprimand him for his heart-stopping maneuver. They needed to get inside.

“Proceed into the cavern.” She took a deep breath. “All ahead bubble.”

“All ahead bubble, aye.” Larsson adjusted his controls and eased forward using the precise thrust of the pump-jet drive and the added maneuverability of the bubblers.

Once the front of the *Bancroft* poked its nose into the cavern, the screen lit up in a rainbow of colors. The LiDAR scanner was safe to explore the confined space without risk of reflection. At first glance, everything was the same as their visit the previous day with the minnow. Nothing appeared to be disturbed, except for her heart pounding in her chest.

As the cave walls engulfed them, a sense of relief washed over her. They weren’t out of the woods by any stretch of the imagination, but at least now they had time to breathe.

Larsson piloted the boat a hundred meters into the main cavern before engaging the articulating spines to come about, facing the *Bancroft* toward the entrance they’d just passed through. “Do we want to hover, ma’am, or should I set us down?”

With the added supercavitating signal topside, she was less certain about their ideal course of action. One half of her said to go deeper into the cave and send out some drones to poke around outside. The other half said to guard the entrance like a bulldog, and at the first sign of another boat, to open fire with everything they had. While this was a good place to be for cover, being trapped inside a cave concerned her more.

A few minutes passed before she realized she’d never answered

Larsson. He was merely staring at his controls and occasionally glancing over his shoulder in anticipation of her orders.

She needed to talk to her XO. “Maintain this hover for the present.” She glanced right. “Hinault.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

“I want you to drop a minnow and get Müller some eyes and ears in that Trench.”

“Dropping a minnow, aye,” Hinault said.

She stepped sideways. “And, Hinault.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

“I want tactical options on our next steps in light of our new supercavitating guest, and I want them in one hour.” She held up an index finger. “Until then, I want torpedoes one and two armed and ready to fire on a moment’s notice.”

Hinault paused, as if trying to summon the response.

She put her hands on her hips. “Is there a problem, Officer?”

He shook his head. “No, ma’am. I just... wasn’t expecting to hear that supercavity-breaking sound from any boat but our own. It threw me off. I’m fine. I’ll have an analysis in your inbox in under an hour.” He spun back to his controls and opened a comm to Engineering. “Halla, ready some eyes and ears.”

They couldn’t afford someone hesitating down here. She relaxed her posture and inched up beside his station. “If you need to be relieved—”

“No, ma’am,” he interrupted. “I’m fine. Really.” His display showed he was already well underway, pulling the last known positions and details of the enemy boats. He was preparing them to run a simulation.

Marín’s voice in their headset broke through the tense silence. “Your minnow is nearly ready. Engine Tech Halla is prepping the launch cavity. We’ll be swimming in twenty seconds.”

Kel needed to find Oscar. “Müller, you have the bridge.”

“I have the bridge,” Müller acknowledged without hesitation.

Doubt and Debris



Kel had been in the public sector for a few years. Maybe it was how having been in the public sector for a few years before returning to active duty, or maybe it was worrying about what Collins had said earlier. Either way, she needed the counsel of her XO, and he wasn't at her side where he should be.

As she passed through the empty halls of the boat, she wondered where the crew was until it dawned on her: they were likely finishing chow or grabbing some rack time while they could. They'd just set down, and the clock was ticking on their next duty rotation. It took practice and rigor to run silent for as long as they had, especially with a class of fresher dolphins. She'd have to give everyone props after the shifts rotated.

Coming up to Engineering, she caught sight of her Bull Nuke and new XO. He was standing beside Klein and Cary, staring down at something.

"How's the *Bancroft* holding up?" she asked, crossing through the open hatch.

"CO on the deck," Cary said, snapping to attention. The others followed suit.

She waved her hand. "At ease."

"All systems are nominal, Captain," Oscar said. "We were just reviewing the latest metrics from the pump-jet."

Kel stepped up beside the horizontal display surface they were standing around. It showed the power output and torque as a

function of their depth and how the articulating spine was impacting their performance. “Is there anything to worry about?”

“Not yet, ma’am.” Klein leaned forward and circled a noisy region on the chart. “I was showing the Bull Nuke how our torque seemed off-kilter. I don’t know if the aggressiveness of our first dive after supercavitation shook something loose, but it’s skewing from our baseline mission start tolerance faster than expected. Usually, this takes a few months of maneuvers to dip to these levels.”

She studied the tabletop display that doubled as a workbench. They were more common on this new class of submarine than any boat before it. With space being at a premium, having surfaces that served multiple purposes was a huge win. Making one that survived both spills and tools being tossed about was a miracle of modern engineering.

“There’s not much we can do down here.” She adjusted the display and zoomed back to study the whole timeframe. “Maybe we can find some downtime to calibrate it when we get out of this pinch. Should the situation deteriorate, what are the consequences?”

“We’ll start making all kinds of noise, which, as you know, will paint us with a football field-sized target,” Klein said.

“We can’t be having that.” She crossed her arms. “Reach out to Hinault and see if he can safely work in a diagnostic and calibration session.”

“Aye, ma’am.” Klein spun around and plugged his headset into his workstation behind their position before sliding into the chair.

She adjusted her gaze toward Oscar. “XO, a word if you please?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He turned to look at Cary who was standing still, his eyes fixed on the display.

It took a moment for him to realize both his Captain and XO were staring at him. “Oh, sorry. I’ll... make like a tree and... leave.” He stepped backward and spun in place, disappearing through one of the hatches deeper aft into the boat.

Oscar glanced back at her. “I assume you’re here to talk about

the new supercavitating signal topside? I was following along while we were monitoring the engine and the effect the rapid pressure changes were having on our efficiency.”

She reached up and ran her hand through her hair. “It would’ve been nice to have you on the bridge beside me. You know, in the moment.”

“I haven’t transitioned all my duties to Klein yet. I’m... just not certain he’s up for it. He’s been acting kinda flighty this week.”

“Is the hesitation yours, or his?” She regretted how she’d worded it as soon as the words escaped. While it wasn’t far from how she felt, she owed him more respect than that.

“Both, actually.” He glanced over his shoulder to make sure Klein wasn’t listening in. He was neck-deep talking to Hinault.

While she knew he was hesitant about taking Collins’ job as XO, she hadn’t imagined he would turn it down. From everything she’d read about Klein, he was more than ready to take on the role of Bull Nuke, and had Oscar not been assigned to the *Bancroft*, she would’ve given it to him.

She fidgeted with the controls on the table, panning through the pump-jet data. “Should I be considering other candidates for XO?”

He stared down at the display, not making eye contact with her. “No... I’m in. I just need... time.”

Time wasn’t a commodity they were exactly overflowing with. They had to think on their feet, not wait until everyone was warm and fuzzy.

“Time’s a luxury in our situation, and I require my XO’s counsel.” She crossed her arms again and studied him. He’d been dodging her gaze since she’d got down here. Something was up. He wasn’t usually this cagey.

She leaned forward and rested her hands on the table. “What’s eating at you, Oscar?”

Suddenly, the boat lurched, and she stumbled backward, slamming against the edge of the hatch entrance behind her. Pain shot up her spine, and she felt a sharp prick in the back of her head.

The overhead lights flashed red as a rain of scraping sounds echoed through Engineering. Whatever was going on outside, something was pummeling the *Bancroft*. They needed to get out of this cave and fast.

As she leaned forward with a wince, she caught sight of Oscar pushing up off the ground. He seemed to be in one piece, but he was sporting a fresh gash on his right arm, and a bruise was forming around it. She nodded at him and immediately winced, bringing her hand up to her head. "Are you okay?"

He inclined his head with an accompanying moan. "What the hell was that?"

"Good question." She pulled her hand away; it was covered in blood.

"Let me get a first-aid kit," Klein said.

She hadn't even noticed the officer walk up beside her. He'd been in his chair a moment earlier and seemed to have fared better than they had standing up.

"I need to get to the bridge." She turned to leave, and a wave of dizziness hit her, causing her to reach out to grasp the edge of the hatch.

Klein sprinted up to her side, having already cracked open the nearby first-aid kit on the worktable. "Maybe you should see the doc?"

She snatched the gauze out of his hand. "Sod the pain. I need to see what's going on." She pushed off and worked her way through the maze of hatches through the bowels of the *Bancroft*. Behind her, she could hear another set of feet following close. Rather than risk seeing who it was and getting dizzy again, she kept her focus in front of her on the approaching climb.

As she stumbled up to the ladder, she reached over her head, and the room started bending. At first, she closed her eyes and held them tight for fear she was falling. It wasn't until a few seconds passed that she realized it wasn't vertigo. It was the boat's spines articulating. Someone was twisting the *Bancroft*, which meant only

one thing: they were turning away from the cavern entrance.

She took the time she was hanging from the ladder to pause and wipe her head with the gauze. It came back beet red. “Bloody hell,” she muttered. A wound was the last thing she needed. Glancing down, she saw Oscar staring up at her, waiting for her to climb. He’d left Klein in Engineering.

“You okay?” Oscar asked.

“I wasn’t expecting the spines to start moving. Thought the room was spinning again.”

She stuffed the blood-stained gauze into her pocket and started climbing. Every second that passed, her mind ran through a new theory of what was going on, from a sneak attack to an earthquake. She needed the reality of the situation to ground her and settle her turbulent thoughts.

Carefully stepping off the ladder, she made her way through a hatch and past the communication and medical offices. She’d have time later to visit Doc Hansen. As she approached the final forward hatch into the bridge, the situation spiraled even further out of control.

A second hailstorm of scratches along their hull cascaded through the boat, filling the room with the ominous threat of death. Nothing freaked a dolphin out more than being crushed under the weight of the ocean. When your boat made scraping or crunching noises, you knew the Reaper wasn’t far behind.

Müller’s voice screamed, fighting to be heard over the grating sound. “Take us deeper!”

Deeper? She had to be kidding.

“Status!” Kel stumbled into the bridge and swung from pole to pole as nimbly as she could. Oscar was lagging further back, breathing heavily enough for her to hear him. They weren’t used to sprinting with wounds through the boat.

Müller did a double-take, looking at both her and Oscar. The blood dripping down Kel’s head must have been a sight. Müller shouted above the noise. “We detected a nuclear detonation above

us, ma'am. The entire sodding mountain was sliding past the cave entrance. I'm surprised we..." She never finished the sentence. A dolphin didn't tempt fate. "Anyhow, after we realized it was safer inside than outside, we turned around and are making our way deeper, beneath more solid rock."

Kel reached up and rubbed her forehead. It throbbed from the constant scraping sounds bouncing through the boat. That and the back of her head being split open by a lorry. "What's grazing against the hull?"

"Nearest we can tell, it's debris from above." Hinault shared the external camera views of the outside of the *Bancroft* on the wall display. Normally, they were useless, but apparently, Larsson had turned on the spotlights.

"We're running bright?" She slid over to her chair and climbed into it, plugging in her earpiece once she was situated.

"LiDAR's a snowstorm," Larsson began. "It was all I could do to see where I was going. We've got the recordings from our previous minnow exploration runs to get us pretty far, but with the roof caving in, I needed something more to make sure we didn't hit any new debris."

She pulled the gauze out of her pocket and pressed it against her head. The resulting sting made her grit her teeth.

Müller glanced back at her and Oscar. "Do you want the bridge, Captain? XO?"

She had the situation well at hand unless her XO wanted it. "Negative, I'm not up to speed yet. Besides, I have this to tend to." Kel held out her bloody wad of gauze. "Can someone get me another?"

"You have the bridge under control, Officer Müller. I've already pinged the doc for our CO," Oscar said. "She'll be here in a minute. She's not happy you snuck past her to put yourself in harm's way." He eyed Kel.

That must have been why he was lagging behind. He was far from out of shape. She'd lost countless virtual bike trainer rides to

him in the workout room. The man could climb on the pedals like a machine.

“Did you hear what I said?” Doc Hansen leaned closer and peered into Kel’s eyes, waving her gloved hand in front of her face.

She hadn’t even heard the doc arrive. Her mind had wandered elsewhere. She shooed her away. “Yes... I mean, no, not exactly.” She shook her head. “What?”

Hansen glanced at Oscar and then back at Kel. “I said you’re gonna need stitches, ma’am.”

Kel studied the view on the overhead displays. Larsson and the second-shift copilot, Masters, were both staring intently at their controls. There was no way she could peel herself away from the bridge. Not now.

She dabbed at her head again with her bloody gauze. “Go ahead and suture me here.”

“Give me that disgusting thing.” Hansen took the dressing from her hand. Only after she looked at it did she see it was covered in grime. “You’re going to get an infection. What’d you do, wipe down all the hatches with this thing on your way here from Engineering?”

Another rain of rocks scraped down their hull, and the room erupted in a hailstorm of thunder. Anyone who wasn’t the pilot glanced toward the ceiling, half expecting water to cascade down on their heads.

“Sorry,” Larsson said. “We’re doing the best we can. They’re getting lighter the deeper we go.”

Hansen sighed and shook her head before setting her bag on Kel’s side table. She then took out and prepared her suture gun.

“How deep are we?” Kel asked.

“We’re taking it slow,” Müller said. “We’re only a quarter klick into the cave.”

She winced when the suture gun clicked against her forehead, delivering a sharp jolt of pain that reverberated through her head. “Flippin’ ‘eck!”

Müller spun around.

“I used the numbing agent, ma’am.” Hansen squinted at the writing on the tube of anesthetic. “I don’t have anything stronger I can use on your head. If you want, I can—”

“No! I’m fine. Keep going.” She waved her hand at Müller. “Back to your station, Officer.”

Müller nodded. “Yes, Captain.”

Larsson impressed her. He hadn’t once flinched or lost focus on his piloting task. Where Müller was jumpy, he was steady and as stable as a rock.

Hansen tapped her shoulder, signaling another suture was coming.

Kel squeezed the arm of her chair and gritted her teeth as the click sent a quake of pain shooting through her head. Tears briefly welled in her eyes until she wiped them away before anyone noticed.

Hansen stuffed a small gauze in her hand without a word. She knew it was incredibly painful, and that her CO was too proud to show her crew she was human.

Kel studied the pilots. They were gesturing at each other’s screens, talking through the navigation of the cave system. It wasn’t every day you drove billions of euros of hardware through a subterranean cavern in the deepest place on Earth.

Another tap, another bolt of pain. She dabbed the gauze against her eyes.

After the tears were gone, she swallowed hard and cleared her throat. “Did we pick up any signals prior to the explosion?”

Müller stepped back to her side, keeping her attention on the panels. “Hinault and Hansen deployed a minnow moments before the explosion. It’s set down at the entrance to the cave. We configured it to record but had to disconnect the cable when we turned around.” She glanced down and made eye contact with Kel before returning her attention forward.

There was something on her mind, but she wasn’t saying it. The CIS had a long way to go.

“Spit it out, Officer. What’s up?”

Hansen tapped her shoulder again, and she gripped her chair. Each suture was easier than the last, but she couldn’t get her eyes to stop crying. She dabbed at the tears.

Müller straightened her posture. “I... think we should do a data burst, ma’am. Before we get out of range.”

Kel reached up and went to rub her hand through her hair until Hansen swatted her away. “We’ve lost line of sight, right?”

“Some time ago, ma’am.”

“So, what do you propose, Officer?” Kel glanced back and Oscar shrugged. He also wasn’t sure if Müller had the situation under control or not. One of them might need to step in and take command if she was losing it.

“How long would it take to prepare another minnow?” Müller asked.

Hansen tapped her shoulder again. There couldn’t be any more room on her head for more stitches. She squeezed her chair, this time with all her might. If she could make her hand hurt, maybe she wouldn’t tear up.

The sudden jolt hit, but just as she’d hoped, she felt no tears. A moment later, a pinch on her arm made her glance down. As she reflexively reached over and rubbed the spot, Hansen pulled away a needle gun.

“We’re done. I’ve given you a painkiller, as well.” Hansen dropped both medical guns into her bag. “I expect you in my office as soon as you’re done here.” She tapped her on the shoulder and pointed two fingers at her eyes and then Kel’s. “That’s an order. I’m watching you.”

Kel nodded. “Yes, Doc.”

“We can have another minnow tethered and ready to rock in under ten,” Marín said over their earpiece. “The deeper in we go, though, the more challenging it’s gonna be.”

She glanced at Müller. The path was obvious. The question was whether she saw it.

Müller's right leg was bouncing. You could almost hear the conversations of self-doubt battling in her head. After what seemed like an eternity, she finally turned and faced Kel. "Permission to return to comms, ma'am."

Kel narrowed her gaze. "Are you relinquishing command?"

"I am," Müller said, staring down at the ground.

She reached out and rested her hand on the woman's shoulder. "You've performed admirably under unprecedented circumstances. Permission granted to return to your station. I have the bridge."

"Your CO has the bridge," Oscar said.

Müller turned in place and stepped away, sliding into her now vacant seat at comms. The second-shift dolphin filling in for her vacated and was presently working their way aftward.

"Weapons, this is the bridge. Marín, are you there?" Kel asked over her earpiece.

"Yes, ma'am. Weapons here. Go Bridge," Marín said.

"Get that minnow in the water in under ten minutes and rig it to piggyback and broadcast line of sight using our blue-green laser. If our second set of ears isn't useful, I want my blasted equipment back, or at least the data they recorded. And I want it by any means necessary."

"We'll have it ready." Marín started shouting orders to Parker and her team in Weapons before she cut the comm.

Kel took a deep breath. "Coxswain, full stop! Hover in place and get your bearings. First sign of trouble, continue forward; speed is at your discretion."

"Full stop, aye," Larsson said. "Hovering with eyes open." He and his copilot brought the *Bancroft* to a stop and issued the command to the onboard computer to hover in place. Decades ago, this same task took dozens of sailors and was nearly impossible to perform. Now, with more advanced technology, hovering a submarine was as easy as pushing a button.

She stared at the camera showing Larsson's view from the pilot's vantage. The scene was surreal. The *Bancroft* was floating in a

massive underwater cavern, and along the ceiling and ground was a sea of stalactites and stalagmites. It didn't even look like they could set down if they needed to.

Oscar walked up beside Hinault. "How long will it take to launch the minnow and fish out our friend at the cave mouth?"

Hinault tapped his control and measured the distance to the cavern entrance. "About thirty minutes to an hour, sir. We need to make sure we don't tangle the fiber. We took several twists and turns getting here."

Oscar nodded and rubbed his chin.

"What ya thinking, XO?" Kel asked.

"Engineering, this is the bridge. How long would it take to drop some drones to check the hull for damage?" Oscar asked, speaking into his microphone over the open boat channel.

She hadn't even thought about checking over the *Bancroft*. If it wasn't leaking, it wasn't on her mind. She knew she was taking their situation for granted. There might be more significant damage they would only detect if they went deeper.

"Bridge, this is Engineering," Klein began. "Fifteen to fit and drop the drones, and another thirty to perform the full check." He seemed confident.

Oscar nodded. "Make it so, Engineering. And Klein?"

"Yessir?"

"You're the acting Bull Nuke going forward. Is that understood?" His voice cracked ever so slightly. She could tell it was hard giving up that command, but Klein, of all people, had earned it.

"Yessir! Thank you for your and the CO's confidence."

The boat-wide comm erupted with celebratory sounds of clicking dolphins, or at least what submariner dolphins thought they sounded like.

While she wanted to join in the celebration, her thoughts were elsewhere. She'd left the bridge for ten minutes and the world had crumbled around her. What prompted them to launch a nuke topside? Had the AAFEUS cavalry arrived and stirred up a hornet's

nest? The questions were bouncing like pinballs in her mind.

She pushed the button on her armrest to open a direct connection to Hinault.

He gave her a quick backward glance before leaning forward to his controls and pressing the connect button. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Get me all the sensors and footage from while I was off the bridge. I want it on my ready room wall yesterday. Also, whatever you and your team have put together around our fubared situation, I need it as well. Is that understood?”

Hinault tilted his head. “Ma’am?”

“Was I speaking in gibberish, Warfare Officer?”

He stiffened in his chair. “No, ma’am! I just thought... it’ll be in your ready room in five.”

Kel cut the connection. This crew was cracking under pressure. That’s twice Hinault had floundered under a direct order, and with Müller imploding, her command chain was a mess. She needed to figure out why Müller turned this boat deeper into the cave rather than guiding them out of this submarine-crushing hellscape. She claimed it was due to the nuke, but at least out there they had a chance to escape. They could supercavitate or something. Down here, they were counting down the minutes until they ruptured.

She pushed up and out of her chair, pausing to let the dizziness fade. “XO?”

Oscar turned to face her. “Yes, ma’am.”

“You have the bridge.”

He nodded. “I have the bridge.”

As she spun around to make her way to her ready room, she paused and glanced back. Oscar was already working his way from station to station, making sure everyone was doing their part and executing on their plan.

Hidey-Hole



The sound of the explosion came a few seconds later when their hull ruptured with a delayed symphony of tension, as rock and debris bounced off and scraped against their exterior. The thought of being crushed in this tunnel was unsettling, to say the least.

She returned her attention to the research she was studying from Hinault on the panels in her ready room. The more she stared at the data, the less it made sense. Their position within the cave gave them plenty of time to exit safely after they detected the explosion topside. While the cavern had kept them relatively safe, it wasn't clear why Müller had taken the actions she had.

If she'd made different decisions, they might have been able to exit and reach safety along the wall of the Trench. Hell, they could even have supercavitated upward for a few minutes to get a safe distance away if they'd gotten out. There were so many possibilities until she slammed the door closed on them. They could be trapped inside this cave system forever. Hopefully, they'd know more when Minnow Two connected up. The automated submersible was due back any minute now.

What made the data even more confusing was the signal they'd received from topside after they deployed Minnow One, the minnow they'd left at the cave entrance. The Echo Drone they dropped during their descent performed an omnidirectional data blast before it was destroyed in the explosion. It was smart enough

to detect torpedoes or nearby underwater detonations. While the signal wasn't guaranteed to be heard, sending it in all directions at least increased the chances. Their goal was to confuse the enemy as long as possible. Unfortunately, it also gave away the drone's position near their original location at the top of the Trench wall — the same place as the earlier detonation.

After Hinault's team did their best to filter the signal from the noise, they managed to salvage bits and pieces of it. The results gave her pause.

During the time leading up to the nuclear detonation, there was an increase in chatter between the Chinese and Russian submarines and boats above the Trench. One minute they were closing the circle on the *Bancroft's* original position, and the next all the boats started moving away. This change in strategy only happened after the supercavitating signal arrived. It was as if they knew what was about to happen and were taking defensive measures to get clear. The broadcast of Minnow One an hour later appeared to have been the final event that triggered the blast.

The foreign messages were encrypted, but the amount of communication and the frequencies told a story of their own. While they'd assumed the Chinese and Russians were working together, this was unequivocal proof. What she didn't understand, though, was why they'd shot on the *Bancroft's* original position without provocation or announcement of their intent. Their actions were grounds for war by anyone's definition. The challenge they faced was surviving to tell the tale.

"What in blazes am I missing?" She turned around and pulled the seating surface down from the wall before sitting with a sigh. The pain medications had done wonders for the first thirty minutes, but now she had a dull throbbing behind her eyes.

When she looked back at the display panels, she noticed that the live feed from Minnow Two was showing some action. It was coming within the line of sight of Minnow One and had turned off its lights, switching instead to passive scans. They were driving it

using the data they'd collected on previous passes through the cave system. They should know in a few moments if they could exit from the direction they'd come.

As she leaned forward on the bench, there was a faint rap on her outer hatch. She recoiled and brought her hand up to her chest. "Bloody hell," she muttered. No one should be bothering her with the privacy light on. When she pushed up on her legs, she paused as the room started to spin. Being lightheaded had only hit her once in her life before today, and that was after she'd passed out from exhaustion in the heat during training for a half-Ironman in the desert. This was nothing like that; she was merely standing up.

The rap on the outside came again, this time a little louder.

She sighed and slid the lever, opening the hatch in one swift motion. "What?"

A submariner stepped backward with his eyes wide. He was holding coffee, and from the looks of it, a sandwich. "I'm sorry to bother you, Captain. The Bull Nuke thought you could use something to drink... and maybe to eat." He swallowed hard, unsure how much trouble he was in.

She rubbed at her forehead. "Yes, of course. Thank you. Please do bring it in." She then stepped backward and slowly sat back on the seat.

The submariner took a step over the threshold into the room, looking left and then right before finally locating the ledge under the LCD panels to hold the cup. "Do you want the sandwich, ma'am?" He held it out for her.

"Sure." She reached out and took the container.

With his hands empty, he paused and saluted her.

She smiled. "At ease, and thank you."

"You're welcome, ma'am." Without another word, he turned and left, closing the hatch behind him with a click.

Removing the lid from the sandwich brought forth a growl from her stomach. She hadn't even realized she was hungry. The waffle this morning had hit the spot, but after that descent and the stress

that followed, she was spent.

She took a bite of the egg salad. It tasted amazing and was exactly what she needed. Gianna must have had a few fresh eggs left from leaving port. After another few bites, she returned her attention to the panel on the wall.

Minnow Two was taking extra precautions to stay low behind the short stalagmites as it rose upward into the main cavern near the cave entrance. When it turned its camera to the side of the mound, her heart sank.

There, by the mouth of the cave, were three boats. Two of them she recognized as Virginia-class submarines of the fabled Block VII design. She'd seen renderings online and caught a glimpse of a schematic over secure feeds with Command, but she'd never seen one in person. From the passive scans, their silhouettes matched a regular Virginia-class submersible, except their masts had an unusually long trapezoidal shape. Their hulls were probably made of the same composite material as the *Bancroft*. If they weren't, they'd have been crushed like a pancake at these depths. There were a few other noticeable changes as well.

To start, their propellers were a design she'd never seen before. They reminded her of the fairing on the old Seawolf-class submarines, except the mechanical shielding seemed to be able to articulate and adjust its direction. Combined with the ejection ports that were visible along the forward cone sections of the boats where the bilge usually was, it meant only one thing: The American boats had lateral mobility upgrades.

The third boat was the strangest she'd ever seen. She couldn't tell if it was a naval ghost or a modern design with an ancient twist. It had the hull characteristics of the Soviet November-class submarine, with a modified prop like that of the American Virginia-class. The US must have been sharing their tech with the Africans; it was the only explanation. To her eyes, the crossbreed of the two designs was a visual disaster.

Kel popped the remains of the sandwich in her mouth and stood

up. She then grabbed her coffee and worked her way out of her ready room, down the passage to the bridge. Being the CO had its privileges, and short walks to work were one of them.

“Status,” she said as she stepped into view of her XO and team.

“CO on the deck,” Müller said, announcing her arrival.

The crew’s eyes remained on their controls, except for Oscar. He slid back to her side. “I’m sure you saw it in your ready, but we ran into some of our friends. Something feels strange, though. We don’t know how they found our little hidey-hole because we never told anyone we were coming down here. Müller thinks they must’ve heard our boat getting pummeled by debris, either that or they picked up the explosion of our first Echo Drone. I think she’s off base. There’s no way their equipment detected clangs on our hull with the world imploding outside.”

She nodded. Oscar was right. And even if they’d picked up the Echo Drone broadcast, that wouldn’t have told them anything about their current position. It was omnidirectional; they could be anywhere.

“So, what’s the next course of action?” She leaned against one of the poles on the bridge. Even though she was upright, she was feeling much better with food in her stomach.

Oscar rubbed his chin. “We’re about twenty meters from the cable connecting to Minnow One. I say we hook up and see if it has anything useful. If we can stay hidden, we’ll hopefully have more details about what we’re facing out there.”

Part of her wanted simply to reach out to their AAFEUS comrades and get the hell out of Dodge. The other part of her agreed with Oscar: They didn’t know what was up, and the more they knew before they laid out the welcome mat, the better.

She took a sip of coffee and let the warmth center her. Having an XO that looked out for her felt good. “I agree. Connect the tether. Let’s see what our little minnow friend can tell us.”

He walked up beside Hinault. “Continue with the link-up to Minnow One. We want everything that sub has witnessed since we

disconnected downloaded on board ASAP.”

As she studied the display, something occurred to her. “How have they not seen Minnow One at the entrance, or heck, even the tether?”

Hinault glanced over his shoulder and then back at his controls. He then highlighted a region on the screen. “From the looks of it, the rock and dust that the explosion shook loose rained down and appears to have covered the tether. I’d imagine something similar happened with the minnow, though, that thing isn’t exactly small. We’ll find out in a moment, ma’am.”

She leaned forward and squinted. Sure enough, he was right. She could hardly make out the cable herself. Had they not known where they’d disconnected it, they might not even know what they were looking for. If it were fifteen or twenty years earlier, they’d be as blind as a bat down here.

With all eyes on Hinault, she watched as he deftly controlled the tiny submersible toward the spot they’d dropped the cable. With each micro-adjustment of the propellers, she imagined the American boats would spring to life and draw their attention to the nearby intruder. Their minnows, however, were stealthy, and unless they were looking for them, it was unlikely they’d be spotted.

Minnow Two laid down on the floor of the cavern, and at first, she thought Hinault had given up. She couldn’t see anything, let alone a cable. It wasn’t until he extended a small pair of articulating arms and one of them reached into the sandy soil that she saw it grasp onto the end of the cable. The left mechanical hand lifted it up out of the murky bottom, and the right blew a burst of water over it. After it was clear, the hand pulled the wire inward, connecting it to Minnow Two’s body to establish a hard link.

A moment later, the panel in front of Hinault went green. “We have a hard connection.” He twisted around and made eye contact with her. “I’m downloading the data now and bringing up the cameras on Minnow One.”

Several muted cheers reverberated through the bridge. She

hadn't realized how tense the situation had become over the past few minutes. Her crew was as surprised with the arrival of their special guests as she was.

"That's some good news," Kel said. "Maintain silence and vigilance, everyone. Remember, we're still running silent."

Stepping back to her chair, she sat down and reached over, swinging one of her panels around in front of her. A few taps in, and she found the data dump from the drone. It was broken out into time segments and active areas of interest their machine-learning systems were churning through. They were processing the stream as it was coming down. She watched as, one by one, the algorithms identified segments of interest. Many people saw military technology as antiquated or behind the times, but few understood that was part of the game. If they knew about half the tech the military arm of their government had at its disposal, they might be more frightened.

Her screen flagged a few segments of interest from before their descent, and as she was reaching forward to tap them, a dialog popped up on her panel. It was an internal secure message marked as urgent. When she tapped it, she saw it was from Hinault.

She squinted at her warfare officer in training a few meters in front of her and then returned her attention to her screen. He was requesting a private meeting with her in her ready room to review the data. There was no way he'd had enough time to analyze it all yet. Whatever he wanted to talk about, he wasn't comfortable bringing it up in front of the others. On a military boat, that was unacceptable. But given the situation, she'd give him some latitude. Worst case, she'd put the oxygen thief in his place, and he'd learn a hard lesson.

When she blanked the screen and shoved it away, Oscar flinched and turned toward her. "Everything okay, Captain?"

"Yes. I'd like to review the data in my ready room." She straightened her uniform and nodded at him before turning and heading aft. Before she exited the bridge, she paused. "Hinault, can

you set me up?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Hinault hopped up and out of his chair and jogged the short distance to her side before they both continued aft.

He was about as subtle as a puppy. She could sense Oscar watching them as they turned into her quarters. She couldn’t blame him. It had been a less than stellar move.

As they crossed the threshold into her ready room, she sealed the hatch and spun around to face him. Before she could get a word out, he was already frantically tapping her LCDs, bringing up the data from the drone along with some older footage.

She stepped up beside him and scanned over everything. One of the feeds he’d brought up was nearly two days old. It was after they’d launched their torpedo toward the FISUS array.

“What in the world is this?” She reached forward and tweaked the display.

Hinault brushed her hand aside. “Please. Give me a second, ma’am.” He adjusted the time series data back to where he had it.

As a CO, she’d never had someone push her away before. She took a step backward, distancing herself from the trainee. Maybe he was wobbling. They hadn’t been underwater for long, but there was a lot of stress to deal with on the bridge. Perhaps she should bring Doc Hansen in for a look.

After he brought up a few more data points on the screen, he spun around to face her. His hands were shaking before he clasped them together. “Captain, it appears someone inside our boat has been communicating with the outside. I believe, with the Chinese.”

Her eyes went wide. “Pardon me?” She stepped closer to the wall screen and started reviewing the data he’d brought up again.

“I thought it was an anomaly at first.” Hinault scratched his forehead and then tapped one of the windows. “After we launched the minnow with a torpedo the other day, I detected a broadcast on the surface. It was faint, but it was there. Given our enemies, it could have been any number of things. The timing was strange, though. It was almost like something had been attached to the

minnow's release mechanism. Anyhow... then I saw this." He reached forward and tapped the second set of data from the payload they'd just downloaded. "The opening broadcast sequence is the same as what I recorded on the surface. It's short and directional, but there's no denying it came from our minnow."

She compared the signals. They were a perfect match. "Are we sure it's from our equipment and not something deeper in the Trench?"

He tweaked the display and brought up a queue of processed commands from the minnow. "Right here." He tapped the screen. "Someone queued up a directional broadcast, followed by a memory wipe instruction. It was a short burst, timed precisely around our disconnect from the cable when we went deeper into the cave system. What the saboteur failed to realize is that our sudden loss of hardline triggered fail-safes in the minnow. The unexecuted commands were saved into our secure, encrypted enclave in the submersible. When we connected, I downloaded all the original data, including these commands."

Her heart raced. Never in her naval career had she ever heard of a spy aboard a submarine. Selling out AAFEUS or their boat didn't make sense. What anyone could hope to gain from such a betrayal was beyond her comprehension. "Do we know what the broadcast said?"

Hinault shook his head. "I don't, ma'am. It's encrypted. But judging by how short it is, I'd say it's only enough room for a brief message or a set of coordinates."

She reached up and ran her hand through her hair. "I don't understand how we never detected this broadcast aboard the *Bancroft*. I mean, we would have picked this up, right?"

He took a step backward and bumped against the wall.

She paused, shifting weight from one foot to the other. "What is it?"

Hinault swallowed hard. "It's why I called you in here, ma'am. I think we did detect it. While I don't have the clearance to confirm

it, you do.”

Traitor



Khelp pushed the feeling down, started it off again. This oxygen thief was accusing a decorated officer under her command of being a traitor to her country. The proof was staring her in the face, yet she couldn't shake the feeling that he was overstepping his bounds. She just couldn't believe it. She'd handpicked every dolphin on this team, and Müller was one of her first. In fact, Müller's father had been her commanding officer aboard her last boat before he retired. She was a lifer dolphin, like so many of her family before her.

She crossed her arms. "That's a dangerous accusation, trainee. I hope you have more than a theory to back you up."

Hinault's eyes glazed over, like he was witnessing his career tipping off a cliff. She was certain he was about to fold until he turned to face the displays. He dug through several screens, seeming to be searching for something that wasn't there. When he finally stopped, he'd brought up two files for her to view, but the computer was prompting for her credentials to open them.

Their quagmire was about to escalate if the details in these documents substantiated Hinault's accusations. She took a deep breath, pressed her finger on the fingerprint scanner, and leaned forward to have her eye scanned by the sensor between the two displays.

The screen flashed a waiting indicator and then, after a pause, the files popped open.

Hinault swallowed hard before reaching out and examining each file. “Unless someone stole Müller’s eyeballs and logged in, her account was the last to transmit to both minnows.” He stepped back. “It’s all there, ma’am.”

She eased closer and studied the evidence. He’d taken a leap of faith accusing Müller without having seen these files. He knew he’d need her credentials to view them, and even they were read-only to her. The first record showed Müller had uploaded an additional command set to the first minnow after Marín signed off on launch. It was only seconds before they released it into the water. The other record repeated the same pattern. A last-minute set of commands uploaded to the second minnow.

When she opened each of the commands, the results were gibberish. She’d never learned to code in assembly. Higher order languages were her jam, whereas low-level assembly, even Rust, never made sense to her.

“I can’t read this. What instructions did she upload?” She eyed Hinault.

He adjusted the windows she’d opened and scrolled past what she assumed was boilerplate code until he paused on the segment at the bottom. The instruction set was simple and concise. Not at all what she’d expected.

He tilted his head. “It looks like she released the claw of the first minnow. That must have been how she dropped the beacon that floated to the surface. For the second...” He tapped the other window and scrolled around, highlighting a few sections, and control clicked through multiple regions of the file. “This one was just as simple. Most of this program is initializing and aligning the transmitter array to a desired location and frequency.” He highlighted another region of text. “This here is where the payload was loaded and broadcast. It’s trivial freshman year academy code.”

Something he’d said hit her like a sucker punch. Müller couldn’t have done this alone. Someone must have attached the beacon to the first minnow. Not only had she failed by recruiting a traitor,

she'd recruited a nest of them.

Kel reached forward and minimized the windows, bringing up a list of dolphins plugged in at their stations. She paused when she found Gianna and tapped her name. The line rang a few times before she picked up.

"Chef Zucca here. Whatcha need, Captain?"

She took a deep breath. "Gianna, we have a situation."

"Is the egg salad bad? I tasted it and—"

Kel shook her head. "No, it was exquisite. This isn't about your culinary skills. I require your expertise as our acting master-at-arms." Submarines had little use for security, apart from breaking up fights or when alcohol was smuggled on board. This was neither of those.

"Oh... shit," Gianna said.

The connection went silent for a few seconds before Gianna spoke again.

"Yes, ma'am. What are your orders?"

Kel clenched her fist, glancing up at Hinault. He was sweating profusely and his hands were shaking. The trainee looked like he was about to pass out.

"You're to keep what I'm about to ask you to do on a need-to-know basis. Only tell the people you absolutely trust. Is that clear?"

"Of course, Captain."

"Very well. You'll need to form up two squads. And do it fast. The first should have two of the biggest blokes you can find. Send them up here to the bridge and have them enter from different ends. As for the second..." She paused to consider how many people were in Engineering. There had to be at least three on shift, but the other shifts needed wrangling, as well. The current contingent had been on duty during the event, but any number of them could've assisted Müller. "You should find... I don't know, five or six other trustworthy dolphins to help with this next part. We need to gather all of our weapons engineers in one place. I don't want them wandering about. Maybe hole them up in the galley. It should be

big enough. And, Gianna?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Her voice cracked.

“You and a few of the others should be armed. Is that understood?”

“Blimey!” Gianna said. “This ain’t another drug infraction, is it?”

“No, I’m afraid it isn’t. Now, make it happen.”

“I’m on it.” Gianna cut the line.

Kel stepped back to the wall before making eye contact with Hinault. “Do you understand why we’re rounding up Engineering?”

He nodded. “I... didn’t at first, but then it hit me. Müller couldn’t have acted alone. Not in the time they put together the minnow for launch.”

She arched her back. “And don’t think for a second I don’t have my eyes on you.”

He froze, his gaze locking on hers. “But... I—”

“Could be conspiring with Müller,” she interrupted. “If you didn’t look like you were about to dampen your trousers, you’d be confined with the lot of them. But I’m not going to.” She leaned forward and powered off her wall displays. “I don’t know why, but you remind me of my son when he found out his mates at school were cheating and had to turn them in. He plum collapsed in our den when he first told me. The boy nearly sent me to the hospital when he fell.”

Hinault crossed his arms, his hands quaking the entire way.

She stepped forward to within centimeters of his face, and he flinched back. “I need you to get your wits about yourself, Officer. You did your family and your country proud today. Now buckle up and follow me back out there. Until security arrives, we have to keep this under wraps and make sure Müller doesn’t do something else to give away our position.”

He nodded and lowered his hands to his side, raising his chin. “Yes, ma’am. I... won’t fail you.”

Now all she had to do was keep her cool and not wring Müller’s scrawny neck. With her hand hovering over the lever to open the

hatch, she paused. “Just a moment,” she muttered as she worked her way around Hinault and opened her personal quarters.

She stepped swiftly inside and reached under her mattress, pulling out her pistol, Maggie. A Glock 19 to be exact. After confirming it was loaded, she slid it into the small of her back and adjusted her shirt to conceal it as best as possible. Every naval rule in the book forbade her from possessing it, but some memories were hard to shake. As a young woman, a late-night ambush in an alley had taught her always to be on guard.

When she spun around, Hinault was watching her, his eyes locked on her hands. Where moments earlier he was having trouble pulling himself together, now he was as rigid as a statue. The sight of the gun seemed to have scared him straight.

He suddenly came to attention. “I’ll leave first.” He turned toward the hatch, unlatched it, and stepped out into the hall.

She strode out behind him and closed the hatch. When she entered the bridge, both Oscar and Müller had shifted and were eyeing their arrival. It took every ounce of her not to lunge forward and strangle that traitorous bitch, but she couldn’t risk it. Not until her support arrived.

“What?” Hinault asked. “Haven’t you ever seen an oxygen thief getting reprimanded before? We can’t all be Müller.”

Kel smirked. The trainee was quick. She walked up beside Oscar. “So, what have we learned?”

“We haven’t had a chance to review the data yet,” Oscar began, “but the minnow near the entrance is picking up some odd water disturbances from deeper down the Trench. We can’t tell what’s going on. Müller was about to move the minnow in for a look-see. We’re not even—”

“No,” Kel interrupted.

She could feel Oscar turn to stare at her.

“I don’t think we should give away the minnow’s position.” She took a step closer to Müller, moving to the side nearest the forward bridge entrance and the emergency kill switch. “For all we know,

it's covered in rock and can't move. Right now, no one knows we're still in the cave. I'd like to keep it that way as long as we can."

Müller adjusted her display, and Kel flinched. "Sorry, ma'am." She squinted. "I just... wanted to show you the readings we're talking abo—"

"I've made my decision!" Kel sighed and turned to Larsson, struggling to control her emotions. "What's the status of our boat?"

Larsson shifted in his seat, caught off guard by the question from his CO. She knew it was out of left field, but she needed to buy time for Gianna to do her thing.

"Captain, the *Bancroft* is holding steady." He tweaked the LiDAR array and cameras on the exterior. "We're hovering in place without a problem. The pump-jet and bubblers are working flawlessly. As far as we can tell, our boat signature is undetectable. Except for our razor-thin umbilical cord, we're invisible to our guests."

Oscar was studying her. He knew something was up.

She was about to ask Hinault for an update since he'd finally sat down when she heard footsteps behind her. Turning, she saw the hulking form of Bauer. His towering frame barely fit through the confined spaces of the *Bancroft*.

As he walked closer, Oscar took notice. "Whatcha need, Bauer? Shouldn't you be down in the turbine room? Klein could use you down there."

Bauer's face went blank, and he glanced at Kel. "Chef Zucca sent me up here, ma'am."

"Right." She nodded and raised a finger, looking over Oscar's shoulder. His backup wasn't yet in view. "She probably sent you to fetch my dishes. They're in my ready room. Give me a moment, and I'll retrieve them for you."

Oscar cleared his throat. "I'm sure he can gather them up, Captain. We need to discuss our next steps."

She narrowed her gaze, fixing to tear into Oscar, when she saw motion over his shoulder. There in the distance was Lange. He was making his way onto the opposite end of the bridge.

Kel lurched forward and slapped her hand against the kill switch above Müller's control panel, and the system went dark. "Bauer, detain Müller immediately!" She stepped back, giving the nearly two-meter-tall dolphin the room he needed.

The seconds that followed were a blur.

Bauer pushed off the bulkhead and leaned in to grab Müller when, in one deft movement, she twisted and dodged his grasp. She then jammed her palm up into his chin, sending him reeling backward. He slammed his head against the wall and slumped to the ground.

"What the hell is going on?" Oscar stepped away from the fray.

Lange, taken by surprise with the sudden incapacitation of Bauer, pushed past the XO and eased his way toward Müller. She slid out of her seat and whirled around to face the muscular cook. He was grasping a butcher's knife in his right hand and a paring knife in his left. That meant Bauer must have been the one armed with the gun, and he was a limp pile on the ground.

"Don't fuckin' touch me." Müller raised her fists and spun her head from Lange to Kel and then back again. "Why are you arresting me?"

Kel reached behind her back and grasped the pistol, raising it and training it on Müller's head. Her aim was true, and her hands were steady. "For plunging us into this chaos and conspiring with the Chinese. You're a traitor to your country. Now, raise your bloody hands before I'm forced to shoot."

Müller lunged forward to grab for Oscar when Kel squeezed the trigger. The sound of the round exploding out of her pistol was muted. Not at all like the normal Glock she shot at the range. This was more of a solid thunk and lacked the traditional bang of gunpowder.

The rubber bullet launched across the space between them before the communications specialist could react. Her head snapped sideways, sending her careening into Hinault's chair and down into a lump on the ground.

Lange was at her side in a second and had zip ties around Müller's hands and feet in the blink of an eye.

Oscar pushed off Masters' control panel. He'd flinched backward, dodging Müller's reach, but in doing so had fallen onto the copilot's controls. "Did you kill her?"

Lange bent down and checked for a pulse. "I don't think so, sir. She's breathing, but she's bleeding from her ear."

Kel hadn't realized it, but her pistol was still raised, trained on the limp officer on the floor. Oscar leaned over and rested his hand on top of the firearm, guiding the barrel down toward the floor.

"Are you ok?" Oscar kept his hand resting on the gun.

She nodded. "Yeah, I think so."

"Good." He took a deep breath and then surveyed the piles of humans littering the bridge. "Any chance you're gonna clue me in on what just happened?"

"Captain!" Hinault waved his hand over his head.

She stashed the pistol in the storage pocket of her command chair before maneuvering around Oscar and sidestepping the fallen forms of Müller and Lange. She closed the distance in a few quick strides and slid up to Hinault's side. "What ya got for me?"

"Here, check this out." He pointed at his screen. He'd brought up the logs from the distant minnow on his controls and was studying the commands and payloads loaded inside.

There on the display was a grouping of commands issued from Müller's terminal. They were similar to the ones she'd seen earlier.

She squinted at the screen. "Did we stop her?"

"Yes, ma'am. Müller was about to broadcast again, except..." Hinault shook his head and started tweaking his other control panel.

"What is it?" She couldn't tell what he was looking at.

Oscar walked up behind them, stepping over Müller's body. "Is someone going to catch us up to speed?"

She reached a hand back, holding up a finger. "What are you seeing?"

Hinault sighed and leaned back in his chair. “The coordinates, ma’am. They’re aimed backward toward the submersibles in the cave. She was broadcasting with lower power using the short-range blue laser array. So, only one boat would have picked it up.”

She squinted at the display but couldn’t decode it fast enough. “Which one was she targeting?”

He swallowed hard. “It looks like the American boat nearest to the cave mouth.”

“Blast!” She stood up straight and stepped backward, colliding with Oscar. “Apologies.” When she turned around to face him, his expression was a mask of frustration. “I know... I know. Give me a second to think.”

“No!” Oscar reached out and rested his hand on her shoulder. “You’re not in this alone, Kel. I’ve got two barely breathing dolphins and one heck of a ringing head from that shot you fired. I’m your XO, and I need you to tell me what the hell is going on.”

He was right. Like Collins had said, she internalized too many of her thoughts and needed to open up, especially with her XO. Living with her husband for so long had trained her to keep her ideas to herself. He was always so self-absorbed in his career and hobbies that he never had time to listen to her.

She took a deep breath. “Alright. Where to begin?” It took a few minutes to explain the situation and how Hinault had recognized some anomalies in the signals. All the while, Oscar and the rest of the crew were eyeing the warfare officer in training. You could almost watch his face transforming into darker and darker shades of red as she told the story.

When she finished, the bridge was silent. It’d finally hit everyone how dire their situation was. With the Chinese and Russians aware of their presence, and a traitor in their midst, there was no telling the lengths the enemy would go to steal their technology. Obviously, they were desperate enough to explode a nuke underwater.

Oscar stepped up behind Hinault, resting his hands on his

shoulders. The trainee flinched. “You did the right thing. Your actions may have saved everyone on this boat.”

“Thank you, sir,” Hinault muttered.

He turned to face Kel. “So, what’s the plan, Captain?”

All eyes turned toward her, and everything hit her at once. They were trapped in a cave five thousand meters underwater, and the only path out was blocked by traitorous allies who were content with nuking their way to recover new biology on the bottom of the ocean. The entire situation couldn’t have been made up and was so far from standard operating procedures that even she was at a loss for ideas. Until an escape plan emerged from the chaos, she needed to clean up her boat and find out who was in cahoots with Müller.

“First things first.” She tapped Masters on the shoulder. “Larsson can handle the stick for a bit. Summon Doc Hansen to attend to our dolphins. After that, return and relieve Bauer of his weapon. You and Lange aren’t to let Müller out of your sight. I don’t care if you have to relieve yourself in a bottle. Is that understood?”

Masters swallowed hard. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Then go, go!”

Masters shot up from her chair and smacked her shoulder into the pole behind it, sending her careening down the hall toward the doc’s office.

Kel brought her gaze back to the others. “Oscar, you hold down the fort here on the bridge. I have an interrogation to perform down in the galley.”

Oscar nodded and took a deep breath. “You sure you’re up for that? I’m more than happy to smack some heads if you need me to.”

Come to think of it, he might be better suited to it than she was. The crew still saw him as the friendly Bull Nuke, not the hard-ass captain.

She smiled. “On second thought, you’re right. Maybe you should do it.”

“Done.”

He turned to leave, and she reached over, resting her hand on

his shoulder. “Be careful.”

“Oh, I will.” He stared down at Müller. “I’ve had a few wrestling matches with an alligator in my time. I know how to keep a safe distance before I strike.” He smiled. “They’re not gonna notice me rubbing their belly until I slit their goddamn throat.”

She chuckled at the metaphor. “And make sure Gianna keeps her cool. She can be a firecracker when you push her over the edge.”

“Don’t I know it.” He reached up and rubbed his shoulder. “This thing aches every morning since that last Renaissance festival. That woman doesn’t take well to being teased. I can’t imagine what she’s like when you put her life in jeopardy.” He straightened up and marched aft, toward the ladder heading down.

In the distance, she caught sight of Doc Hansen sprinting onto the bridge. Masters was in hot pursuit. When she reached Kel’s side, she bent down to check on Müller.

“Not that one!” Kel pulled Hansen back and pointed at Bauer’s hulking form resting against the bulkhead. He was only now starting to move. “Check on him first. That traitorous wench can wait. A little more pain might do her some good.”

Hansen squinted at her and, without a word, stepped over Müller’s body, working her way to Bauer.

“What’re we gonna do about our guests, ma’am?” Hinault asked.

She could tell he’d been listening intently to her the entire time, while also focusing on his controls. There was a reason he was a warfare officer—and a damn good one at that. His eyes and ears were always working to help his crew.

“Well,” she reached up and rubbed her chin, “let’s get Adams up here from the second shift. We’ll need help guiding this conversation with our friends.”

Hinault tapped his controls and started talking to someone below deck near the crew quarters. They were going to rouse the next shift’s CIS out of bed.

Bauer groaned from across the bridge as he pushed up off the ground and stretched his back. He looked like he’d taken a hit from

a lorry. His neck was red, and he was wiping something off his face.

“You gonna be ok?” Kel nodded toward the cook.

“Yeah. I think so.” He straightened up and groaned. “Bit of a blow to the ego, but... I’ll swim again.” When their eyes met, he lowered his gaze to the ground. “I’m... sorry, Captain.”

She shook her head. “Don’t be. Müller’s a black belt. But one suggestion for next time: make sure you have your weapon handy and ready to use. That, or have your backup closer.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He rubbed at his neck, moving aft toward medical.

Hansen had shifted position and was now working on Müller. She was still as limp as a pile of rags. Unlike with Bauer, she didn’t care about the state of her former CIS. To her, she was already an enemy prisoner with information they needed.

She clasped her hands behind her back. “Is she alive?”

“Her pulse is weak, but yeah, she’s alive.” Hansen reached into her bag and pulled out her needler.

Kel clenched and unclenched her fist. “Don’t give her anything that’ll reduce the pain or keep her under. I want her agonizing over her decision, and I need intel.”

Hansen paused, staring at her needler. “I really should—”

“She’s a prisoner of war, Doctor,” Kel interrupted. “I’m in command of this submarine, and the moment she placed our mission and lives in jeopardy, she became the enemy. That woman put our boat in the crosshairs of that nuke up top. It was targeting our previous position. The sooner you understand our situation, the better we’ll be.” She tilted her head. “Are you ok with your orders?”

Hansen glanced up, realization dawning on her face. She hadn’t been privy to the details until now. No one outside of the bridge had. She dropped the needler in her bag and stood up.

“Bauer and Lange, get the prisoner to my empty checkup room and make sure she’s properly restrained. Any supplies I have in there, throw in my office.” She turned to face Kel. “I assume I’ll have a guard rotating through, or should I be monitoring her?”

“We’ll have shifts to cover her and her compatriots when we figure out who they are. Until such time,” Kel stepped forward and stared her in the eyes, “she’s to remain alive, but no measures to comfort her are to be taken.”

Hansen nodded. “Yes, ma’am. Understood.”

When she turned to leave, both Bauer and Lange picked up Müller. One of them grasped her by the shoulders, the other by the feet. Watching the two brutes lug the tiny woman down the hall was surreal. She was both fragile and deadly at the same time—a combination not to be underestimated.

Kel nodded as Adams slipped past her. The thin, almost frail woman was a contrast to the athletic form of Müller. When compared physically, they were at opposite ends of the spectrum. She hoped Adams was up to snuff to be on her primary team.

As she stepped over to her chair, a simmering anger began to bubble up within her, threatening to boil over. Her crew was getting the new CIS situated, with Hinault and Larsson working together to bring her up to speed. Kel wasn’t frustrated with them; she was frustrated with herself. She was the one who missed a signal with Müller. While she wasn’t sure what, there had to be something that would have pointed to the CIS sooner. She couldn’t believe she’d put the traitor in command of her boat only hours earlier. Somehow, she’d made it past her trust radar and still came out the other side rotten. Who was to say that Adams or Hinault weren’t in cahoots with her as well?

She exhaled and closed her eyes to center herself. Oscar would take care of Müller’s mirror in Engineering—the person on the other end of the line who acted on her commands. They were just as traitorous as she was. Right now, she needed to focus on their situation in the cavern.

“Alright.” Kel stepped up behind Adams, who was cycling through the recent communication data dumps from the minnow. “Let’s get a lock on the USS *Walrus* and *Oarfish*. We don’t know which is which, but my ex-husband is commanding one of those

boats. If he sold out the Americans..." She shook her head. "Then bloomin' shove me in a torpedo tube and shoot me into the briny deep. That man sweats red, white, and blue. If anyone has our back, it'll be him."

Interlude

The Builders

Ylashed at the fragment hovering in front of him. When his hand hit the edge of the floating portal in space-time, the surface rippled, but his fingers passed straight through.

Willow smirked and shook her head. “You didn’t honestly think I’d leave it exposed, did you? I saw what you did earlier. You clearly have remnants of control over this fragment from before I cloned it, and despite my best intentions, I must’ve missed something.”

She turned to glare at him. “While you were engulfed in the torment of watching this lifemark, I moved the fragment, lest you get any ideas.” She gestured toward his still outstretched hand. “Which, apparently, you did.”

“This sequence of fragments should’ve been disposed of millennia ago.” He narrowed his gaze at her. “I trust you cloned it from Hera or her like.”

Willow’s heart skipped a beat, but she fought to keep her projected exterior calm and collected. If he knew about Hera being the source of her experiment, then it was only a matter of time before he took this to Zeus. Accusing the wife of the son of Cronos of stirring the ancient pot on Earth was bound to get him struck down—a feat that hadn’t been exercised in quite some time.

He glared at her, studying her response and searching for a crack: any glimmer of a clue he could work with.

But she gave him none. Instead, she waved her hand at him dismissively and turned her attention back to Kel. “What makes you think I didn’t conjure it myself from the archives of Olympus?”

He let out a low growl and leaned back, lowering his hands to his sides. She could feel his eyes trying to break through her layers of protection. The heat was almost making her sweat.

Finally, he relented, though she couldn’t tell whether he was happy or frustrated with her response.

“Then that would mean your skills have grown.” He shifted in his seat and leaned forward, staring into the portal. “One might say they’ve grown... too far.”

She snickered and waved her hand to bring Kel’s portal into the foreground, engulfing their virtual space. “I wouldn’t say that. Sleight of hand and summoning do not entitle a Builder to ascend. They merely help one stay alive.” She glanced at him coyly and returned her focus forward. “Let’s continue watching, shall we?”

“If we must.” He sighed and crossed his arms.

Willow had to keep Helios here, to see this lifemark through, and to quell his concern. Either that or she had to decipher his motives for being here. Whatever had captured his attention in this fragment seemed to instill fear in him. Her task was to uncover exactly what that was.

Boiling the Ocean



The minnow and US adjusted the target laser communication array on the underwater lasers were still limited to hundreds of meters, they were useful in situations like this or when they needed to aim at boats on the surface. Their challenge was that they couldn't tell friend from foe among the Virginia-class nuclear submarines.

From what all her contacts in the navy had said, these new Block VII designs had been modified to be fast-attack submersibles. The highly modular construction techniques used in this class of boats allowed the Americans to pivot the implementation without starting from scratch. With the increasing prevalence of ocean biomass skirmishes, they needed something more than a nuclear slingshot. Unfortunately for the Americans, a recent decade-long focus on fiscal spending meant the UK was able to leapfrog their technology with the *Bancroft*. Something the US Pentagon was none too happy about.

"I've locked in the coordinates for the USS *Walrus* and *Oarfish*, ma'am," Adams began. "We're ready to broadcast. Once we go live, we'll be detected within seconds. It's only a matter of time before they figure out where the broadcast is coming from."

Kel took a deep breath. Blowing the cover of the minnow wasn't ideal, but they had limited options. It wasn't as if they could drift silently past the boats undetected. "Understood. Hinault?"

"Ma'am?" He turned to face her.

She nodded. "What's your recommendation for our defense?" She knew their choices as well as anyone. Her hope was that putting him on the spot would pull his mind out of any residual funk in which it might still be lingering.

He reached up and adjusted the cord on his earpiece. "We... don't have many courses of action, ma'am. Any explosive detonations could send this place caving in on us. If we don't go back the way we came, our only hope is to retreat deeper into the cavern to find another way out."

Another way out. The thought had occurred to her countless times, both in this situation and with Collins. That reminded her.

"Give me a minute," she muttered as she withdrew her tablet from her thigh pocket and tapped the screen to open a direct line to Oscar. When she turned around, she dropped her voice to a whisper. "How's my XO faring down in the galley?"

While his earpiece activated, the background noise blasted through. The voice she heard sounded like Marín, but a few decibels higher. *"Are you fuckin' kidding me, Nuke? I'm no goddamn spy. But if we's got a Karl Marx-loving prick in our midst, I'll kill the son of a bitch when I get my hands on them. Just point me at 'em."*

"Shut up!" Oscar was fighting for control. She swore she heard the familiar click of a pistol being armed, and the room suddenly fell silent. "Sorry about that, ma'am. Our weapons engineer was a bit... vocal when I confronted her about being a traitor."

She chuckled. "Yeah, I can imagine some of them would be. Marín's always loved her toys and her country. I couldn't see her selling out her Spaniards any more than you turning traitor on the Crown. I take it you're not any closer?"

"No. But I have my thoughts, though. I was gonna pull 'em out one at a time and run 'em through the wringer. It'll take time. Need me for anything?"

The faintest itch tickled her nose. She couldn't tell if it was her own self-doubt over her idea or the blasted ventilation. Now wasn't the time for indecision. "I was thinking of pulling Collins out of the

brig. He came up through Weapons, and we could use him down there while you're digging out our traitor. Before you get angry—"

"I think it's a great plan," Oscar interrupted.

"You do?"

"Absolutely. I haven't loaded a torpedo or launched a minnow in decades. We could really use his help, if he's up for it."

She, of all people, hadn't forgotten how pissed he was. He'd been locked in a closet for almost two days, and she'd put him there. But there was a time and a place for frustration, and being on the brink of meeting one's maker didn't afford room for egos.

"He'll be fine. Can you arrange for someone near the galley to bring him to the bridge? Also, have Gianna muster some hands from the second and third Engineering shifts to assist him in Weapons. I'm sure we have some people he can work with."

"Will do. We can wake up a few dolphins. It might be hard to wrestle that kitchen knife out of Gianna's hand, though. I swear she wants blood, but I'll manage." The line went quiet for a moment until Oscar spoke again. "Everything okay with our guests?"

She turned to face Adams. "We're about to find out, once I have a contingent in Weapons, that is."

"Well, I should move my keister then. Good luck, Captain."

"You too."

The line cut, and the bridge fell silent. At least as silent as a submersible could be. The only sound within earshot was from the constant hum of life support. It was busy circulating and regenerating the air with clean oxygen. The entire system was a delicate chemical feat which could fall apart at any moment. And there she was, standing five kilometers below sea level, wishing she could see the sun again and hug her grandkids. Maybe she should have listened to her father and aimed for the stars instead of the seas. Mars was looking better and better by the second.

As she stared at the wall of displays showing the external view from their cameras, the LiDAR array lit up with streaks of yellow and red.

“I thought the aftershocks would have subsided by now?” She stepped up beside Hinault.

He shook his head. “These aren’t coming from topside, ma’am. There was an explosion down below. Our sensors were reading elevated temperature levels in the water, but I figured it was due to circulating currents from the nuke. Apparently, I was wrong.”

“What does—” she began.

“I’m picking up a distress signal, Captain,” Adams interrupted, her eyes squinting at her display. “I don’t know if this is right, but the minnow’s showing it’s coming from deeper in the Trench.”

If any number of shoes could’ve dropped, this wasn’t the one she’d have imagined. She stepped over beside Adams. “Do we know what it’s saying?”

A cascade of rocks slammed the hull, sending her jumping against the pole to her left.

She reached up to rub her shoulder and tapped her earpiece. “This is the bridge. Status report.”

Klein’s voice broke in first. “Bridge, this is Engineering. The pump-jet checks out fine, and we’re not detecting any leaks at the aft end. I’ve sent Cary on a walkabout for a visual.”

“Bridge, this is Weapons,” Halla began, “we’re clear here, as well.” They must have jostled the oxygen thief out of bed and assigned her to cover the empty position.

The check-ins continued from throughout the boat. While the *Bancroft* was holding up, she couldn’t say the same for the commies at the bottom of the Trench.

Adams glanced up at her and waved her over before returning her attention to her display.

She slid up beside her, being sure to keep a tight grip on the handle attached to the back of her chair. “Go.”

“I’ve translated the distress call, ma’am.” Adams brought up the translation on her screen.

assistance. I repeat, we're in need of assistance. We're taking on water and won't last long. Please send help immediately.

She shook her head. "Are they taking the piss? Do they really think someone is around to rescue them? Unless..." She raised her gaze to the display from the minnow.

"What is it, ma'am?" Hinault asked.

"I want a full active LiDAR and infrared sweep of the Trench." She pointed at the screen. "Now!"

"But that'll give away the position of the minnow." Masters shifted in her chair. She seemed to regret her random interruption the moment she finished talking.

Kel squeezed the handle tighter, feeling her nails digging into her palm. "I'm pretty sure our local spies have already disclosed our position, sailor. Now we're at a disadvantage and need to play catch up. Illuminate the bloody Trench already!"

"Yes, Captain." Hinault adjusted his controls, and the Trench lit up in a wall of bubbles and colors, mostly in shades of yellow and red.

"Unless I'm reading this wrong, ma'am," Hinault glanced back at her and paused, "the ocean... is boiling."

Staring at the temperature readings made her stomach tighten as she watched their options disappear before her eyes. There wasn't a chance in Hades their submersible could withstand water temperatures like that. She'd never seen or heard about conditions close to this except near volcanic lava vents. Their hull would buckle and lose pressure in a matter of seconds if they were out there, and judging by the water flow, the cave was about to get toasty.

"Did someone wake the Kraken, or did we hit the side of this blasted cavern?" Collins appeared from the forward entrance onto the bridge. He was sporting a few new red scratches on his cheek.

"You okay, Lieutenant Commander?" she asked.

He nodded. “Yeah. I lost my hold on the ladder and almost fell. My face stopped me, though. So, that feels wonderful.” He reached up and rubbed at the marks.

She chuckled. It was astonishing how some people could turn themselves from asshole to jokester at the drop of a hat. “Well, I’m glad you’re good. I need you to do me a favor. One old dolphin to another.”

He stepped up behind Adams and Larsson and studied their display. It took him a minute, but he saw it. Their situation was dire. He turned his head toward her, his chin quivering. “Where do you need me, Captain?”

“We’ve got a few traitors in our midst. Müller was the first, but she’s been taken care of.” She stiffened. “The second is being sifted through down in the galley.”

He nodded, grasping the pole at his side with his shaking hand. “Is the Bull Nuke cleaning house?”

“He is. I’ve promoted him. The rest of the ship doesn’t know yet, but he’s our XO.”

Collins stared down, his gaze glassy.

She stepped forward and rested her hand on his shoulder. “I need your help, Thomas. I don’t have a head of weapons, and I won’t have one until we identify the second spy. We’re already scrounging up some bodies to work with. Gianna should have a few—”

“Done,” he interrupted, coming into a salute. “I won’t let you down, Captain.”

Kel came to attention, saluting him back.

His shoulders sank and he tilted his head sideways. “Is that what I think it is?”

She nodded and returned to face the screen of red and yellow. “If you guessed boiling ocean, then yep. Add to that, our previous position topside being nuked, and that paints the grim picture that was our afternoon. If we hadn’t been here in the cave, then we’d be...” She never finished that sentence.

When he turned his head, she felt his gaze peering at her before turning back to the display.

“We’ve still got torpedoes one and two armed from earlier,” she said, breaking the lingering silence. “Let me know if you need anyone else once you get down there.”

“Aye, Captain.” Without another word, he worked his way forward from the direction he’d arrived.

With their defenses covered, all that was left was to hail the Americans and hope for the best.

She stepped sideways toward Adams. “Do we still have the communications array lined up?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Alright.” She took a deep breath. “Let’s open a comm and see if we can’t flush out a snake from this hole. Lock onto my microphone only.”

Sonar Fishing



This slight Captain Kalm Williams of the HMS *Bedouin* was requesting a direct line of communication with the American boat commanded by Captain Joel Friedrich.”

She waited in silence for the response. Her fingers on her left hand twitched, yearning for something else to do besides merely gripping the pole at her side. Establishing this comm gave away the minnow’s position, but they couldn’t hide in this cavern forever. Working with their AAFEUS allies was their best hope of survival, even with an enemy in their midst.

Her ex-husband spoke a moment later. “This is Captain Friedrich. It’s good to hear your voice, Captain Williams.”

The knot in her stomach loosened. “Likewise. We’re requesting a switch to ship-to-ship communication encryption protocols locked on our boat’s AAFEUS ID. Awaiting your confirmation.”

Adams raised her hand, gesturing with two fingers, signaling they had a lock on which boat was his. It was the second boat, the USS *Walrus*.

“This channel should be secure for everyone,” CO Friedrich began. “It’s already encrypted with AAFEUS signatures.”

She tightened her grip on the bar, and her knuckles turned white. “I’m awaiting your confirm, Joel.”

Using his first name was breaking every protocol in the book, and he would know it. Hopefully, it would send the message she

needed. She could make out voices in the background whispering to him before his microphone cut. Their situation wasn't something she wanted to discuss over a public channel.

She muted her side. "I want all eyes on those other boats. If they so much as open a flipping waste airlock, I better hear about it."

"Aye, Captain!" they all said.

CO Friedrich's voice broke back over the line. "Activating AAFEUS boat-to-boat encryption lock."

There was a series of clicks over her headset, and then the light on the panel went from green, to red, to yellow, and then green again.

She reached up and unmuted her end. "Are you there, Captain Friedrich?"

"Kel, what's all this about? In case you hadn't noticed, we're at war, and the other side isn't exactly lobbing grenades. You can't be breaking protocol over a public—"

"I'm keenly aware of the situation, Joel," she interrupted, biting her tongue. "We don't have time to argue. AAFEUS has been compromised. We've uncovered one spy aboard the *Bancroft* and are shaking down our people to find another. We know they were in communications with someone on the USS *Oarfish*."

"That's nonsense!" His voice sounded off-kilter. She knew that tone. He'd used it on her when she confronted him about his infidelities.

"Joel!" She spun around, turning away from her crew. "We'll transmit our intel once we disconnect. My compromised CIS dropped two signals to the Russians and Chinese. One through a manual beacon she floated to the surface, and a second directed topside. We caught her preparing another encrypted signal to the *Oarfish*. I need you to check your ego and think. How did you know to descend into these caves?"

He fell silent.

She glanced over her shoulder to verify the line was still connected. It was green. "Joel?" Her voice crackled.

“It can’t be,” he muttered.

“What is it?”

“I know Mikey.” He sighed. “No, there must be some mistake. We played golf a few weeks back. There’s no way—”

She slammed her fist against her chair. “Joel! Out with it already. Who is Mikey?” Her ex’s inability to deal with reality, even when it smashed him in the face, was one of his worst qualities.

“Captain Michael Snyder on the *Oarfish*,” Joel began. “He said they picked up a signal from your boat in this cavern. We were already coming in through the Trench. Since we weren’t topside, he wouldn’t have gotten a bearing on your CIS’s signal. How were they transmitting?”

Her jaw dropped. The blasted array. Why hadn’t they seen it before? “She was employing the blue-green laser. Blimey! They must have compromised our comm protocols.”

“Captain!” Hinault said, raising his voice so she’d hear it over her earpiece. “The *Oarfish* is moving. It appears to be coming about on the African *Tefnut* boat. From the looks of it, they dropped something in the water. And whatever it is, it’s headed our way.”

She spun around, squinting at the display. Hinault brought up an image on the screen of the object the *Oarfish* had released. “Is it targeting the minnow?”

“No, ma’am.” He glanced back at her, his eyes wide. “It’s heading deeper down the cave, toward the *Bancroft*.”

“Oh, for crying out loud!” She’d never seen anything like it before. It appeared to drop out of the bottom of the *Oarfish* like it was a fish excreting waste. The shape reminded her of the *Bancroft*, except it was far smaller. Like them, it looked nimble and almost alive as it descended through the water and turned on a dime to dodge a stalagmite.

“Evasive maneuvers!” Captain Friedrich screamed in her ear over their comm.

She quickly dialed down the earpiece volume, but the echo of his voice still rang in her ears. When he spoke again, it was almost a

whisper. “Kel, he dropped a Hunter Seeker Drone.”

“What in the world is that?” she asked, still staring at the rainbow-colored image of the sub on the display. One thing was certain: with a name like Hunter Seeker, it wasn’t a simple exploration vessel.

“Think of it like a military flying drone above ground,” he began. “The difference is, this one’s fully autonomous and it’s designed to seek out its prey underwater. If you’re deeper in this cavern, you’d better find a way to defend yourself and quick.”

“Frickety frack,” she muttered, skipping down toward Larsson. “Talk to me. Is there anywhere to hide in this cave system that’ll give us an advantage taking on that thing?”

He’d already started studying their previous LiDAR map of the caves. “There are quite a few branches ahead that should slow it down. I’d think if we went deeper to here,” he pointed at a vertically descending branch on the map, “we’d be safer and could more easily maintain a defensive position. One where we knew where it was coming from.”

“We already know where it’s coming from.” Masters caught her eye. “Why not sit still?”

“Because we’re not prepared to defend ourselves in a cave,” Kel said, working her way down toward Hinault. “If we launch a torpedo, we could bring the entire cavern down on ourselves.”

Masters flinched. She’d spoken before she’d thought through their situation. A common occurrence with new dolphins, but not something she expected from her pilot. They were usually a few steps ahead.

She pointed at Larsson. “Make it happen.”

“Ma’am!” Adams interrupted. “We’ll lose our link to the *Walrus*.”

Kel froze. She’d forgotten they were still physically tethered to the communication line. Her people’s lives were her priority at the moment, not her ex-husband. She reached up and activated her comm. “Captain Friedrich, we’re cutting this connection. Good luck.”

While the light was green, a reply never came. For all she knew, they were sinking. She pushed the thought away and turned her attention to Adams' waiting gaze. "Sever the minnow's tether, and Larsson, get us out of here!"

When she swung around to face Hinault, he was already working on something. "What are our options, Officer?"

He shook his head. "Without a team down in weapons, our options are still limited. I have a few ideas once they're ready, though."

She tapped her tablet and connected a comm with the front of the boat. "Weapons, this is the bridge. Who's fixed to earn their keep down there?"

"Shit! Hold on." A faint voice broke in. It almost sounded like Collins. A moment later, it came in louder. "Sorry, Captain. I was just getting situated down here and was showing Jones, Halla, and Langley the ropes of these torpedoes."

"Alright, we got a situation and need your team," she began. "I'll pass you over to Hinault. He's ready to give you orders."

Hinault snapped his head around, and his eyes went wide.

Kel put her hand over her mic and nodded, mouthing the words, *Go on*. She couldn't tell if he was uncomfortable making the call without her or giving his former XO orders.

He returned his attention to his display, and his shoulders seemed to stiffen. "I need you to load up some of the mini anti-torpedoes and prepare to drop them out of the forward ballast tanks."

"Bridge, this is Weapons," Collins began. "I think you broke up there. Did you say drop them out of the ballast tank?"

Kel smirked. She could imagine her former XO was thinking this was another one of her cockamamie ideas, but it wasn't. "He did. There's no room to launch them in this cave, but we still need cover without bringing the roof down. It's ingenious."

Hinault shifted in his chair. "Be sure to only load a quarter of the normal charges. We're not sure what kind of damage they'll do

to the cave, so let's not raise or lower the roof, shall we? Also, throw on some of those motion tracking sensor heads. Remember to clip the leads to the propeller before we drop them. We don't need them trying to move around."

"Let me get this straight," Collins began, his voice sounding exasperated, "you're asking us to do surgery on these torpedoes to turn them into mines. Why not just use our existing mines?"

"No! That's too much explosive." Hinault rubbed his right eye before tapping his screen. He then circled a section on one of the schematics he'd been fiddling with when she'd walked up. He dropped them into a message and hit send. "I'm sharing the details now. If you know of a way to crack open those mines, then by all means. These mini torpedoes are designed to have modular payloads. We're simply playing Lego and repurposing them to reduce their explosive impact."

"Captain," Larson interrupted.

She swiveled toward him. "What's up?"

"I'm ready to curl up the spine to descend down this cave. It's more of a drop than a dive, really." He flipped his plan up on the screen above her head.

If they actually dove, they'd have less room to come out of the dive, so it looked like he was planning more of a curled up drop to reach the right depth. Once there, they were gonna level out and head down the third branch they passed. She nodded. That should buy them time.

Kel tapped her ear, switching to the open boat-wide channel. "Attention, this is your captain. We're about to perform a defensive maneuver and will be curling up the *Bancroft*. Stay clear of the articulating points so you don't get pinched."

After she cut the comm, she pointed at Larsson. "Dive!"

"Dive, aye, Captain."

As she made her way to Adams' side, she caught a glimpse down the forward hall. It was articulating upward and toward port. Larsson was planning a tight curl. A challenging maneuver in a

normal situation, let alone in this cave system. One wrong adjustment at depth could tear their boat open like a knife through butter.

She had to trust her coxswains, so she returned her attention to her CIS. “Talk to me. Do we have any ears on the Hunter Killer?”

Adams straightened in her seat. “I snagged some low-frequency modulations coming off the Hunter when it passed over our second tethered minnow. But I won’t be able to do anything with it until we settle down and disengage our pump-jet and bubble injectors. It’s not like we have a tow antenna in the water.”

Without more details on the sophistication of this drone, they were operating blind. Add to that the EU’s lack of investment in listening gear that didn’t require a kilometer-long tow cable in the water, and you were as deaf as a haddock. While their hull was lined with antennas, it couldn’t differentiate low-frequency sounds coming from itself or an external entity without reducing the variables to near zero.

“Did we learn anything else about the drone as it was passing over our second minnow?” She leaned forward and studied Adams’ display. There were multiple views of the Hunter Killer: infrared, LiDAR, and visual. The attacker was small and encased enough that in passive infrared it let off little to no heat. Whatever warmth there was seemed to be due to the temperature delta of having just been deployed from inside the *Oarfish*. The more it moved, the more its signal disappeared. With the LiDAR being an active scan, they couldn’t use it without giving up their position.

“Despite the full suite of scans from the first minnow, it still chose to ignore us.” Adams brought up the motion of the Hunter drone submersible. Its velocity dipped the moment their scans triggered, and then a few seconds later it accelerated away. “That tells me the AI or expert system they’ve got onboard is smarter than a starfish. They know what they’re looking for.”

“Yeah, us,” Kel muttered.

Adams flinched and glanced back, eyeing her.

“Sorry, that wasn’t helpful.”

“It’s alright, ma’am. I was thinking the same thing. It was like you were in my head.”

“So our only way to detect this drone is to sit still and wait?”

“Well, not exactly. I asked Larsson and Masters to drop some of our mini sonar echo buoys as we go. They should—”

Her eyebrow raised at the CIS. “You didn’t clear that with me?”

“You...” Adams swallowed hard, “were talking to the XO... I mean, Officer Collins, ma’am. Hinault cleared it.”

“Did he?” She glanced at him, but he was deep in conversation with the team below deck. While it surprised her he made the call on his own, she was happy he was comfortable to do it. When she returned her gaze to Adams, she’d already brought up an overlay of the sonar buoys they’d deployed. There were dozens and dozens spidered over the cave system, each at different depths.

“How the blazes are sonar beacons going to be useful?” She shook her head. “I realize they work great in open water, but in here... it seems like they’d cause reverberations and echo back our position.” She tapped Adams’ screen and zoomed in on a few of the drops they’d made.

As the *Bancroft* had descended, Masters launched the buoys in bursts, firing multiple sonar modules down each of the caves they passed. The miniature sound beacons were designed to execute any arbitrary program they were given once deployed.

“No noise is bad noise with sonar, especially with our stealth hull.” Adams tweaked her screen. “I threw together a program when I was off-shift, you know, after we got caught down here in this cave. I used to play a lot of *Sonar Fisherman* as a kid. We’d install mods that allowed us to fish in a cave, and heck, even in outer space... which didn’t make sense without air, but, hey, we were kids.”

Kel waved her hand forward. “Where’s this headed, Officer?”

Adams brought up her plan. “I set up a program to direct each cluster of six sonar pods we fired to spread as far as possible in the

direction they're aimed. They'll only activate after passively detecting nearby motion. Each pod was programmed with different frequency signatures. When they fire, we should—"

"Be able to figure out where the Hunter is," she interrupted. Her hand was frozen in midair. "That's brilliant."

"Thank you, ma'am." Adams rotated her display to show the broader cave system. Masters had just fired another round of sonar beacons below them, down the deep hole they were descending through.

"Larsson, how long until we're at your hiding spot?" Kel glanced in his direction right as he was slamming his yoke sideways, sending her sailing starboard. She smacked her hip against her captain's chair and toppled into it. "Ugh!" Pain exploded up her side, and the room spun for a few seconds as she struggled to catch her breath. Once she had, she closed her eyes to center herself and fought to suppress the anguish. The pain from the gash in her head was rearing its ugly head again, but the last thing her crew needed was a crying captain.

After the bridge stopped careening in circles, she flipped over onto her butt and moaned, rubbing her left hip. A second jolt of pain shot down her leg. That was gonna leave a mark. First her head, now her hip. She was getting too old for this shit. Captaining a submersible wasn't supposed to be like a gymnastics floor exercise, and it certainly hadn't ever been painful on the body.

"Sorry about that." Larsson craned his neck to see if she was ok before returning his attention forward. "I should've—"

"No," she interrupted, waving her hand and twisting her torso to reduce the pressure on her side. "Don't be. You focus on keeping us alive, not comfortable."

"We're not far from our target," Larsson said. "Another few bends and we'll be there."

"Hold up short!" Hinault leaned over his panel to peer past Adams at the pilot. "We need to drop a few ordinances before we settle in."

Her chair vibrated as the pump-jet reversed thrust, fighting to bring the *Bancroft* to a hover. After a few seconds of careful adjustments, they slowed to a stop, narrowly dodging a nearby stalactite. They hadn't been moving very fast since Larsson had already burned off most of their descending momentum slipping through the cavern.

She activated her earpiece before glancing at her tablet and tapping the screen to connect to the call between Weapons and Hinault. "This is the bridge. Where are we with our Hunter mines?" She groaned as she shifted in her seat, trying to transfer her weight further onto her other thigh.

"You mean besides soiling our britches after that last turn?" Collins chuckled. "That was bonkers, and I'm pretty sure Acosta broke her wrist. We're finishing up with a few mines... No, no, no!" A clang echoed over the comm. "I said the white tips, not the gray ones. Does this look white to you? Did your momma forget to pack your glasses? Goddamn oxygen thieves are gonna kill us yet."

Two of the lights on Hinault's display turned green. When she flipped up her tablet, she confirmed that Collin's team had loaded the first set of homemade mines.

"We're a go, Masters!" Hinault wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. "Spread 'em out every thirty to forty meters. We should have four when they're done."

"Aye, sir." Masters leaned toward Larsson and started coordinating the deployment.

A short time later, the *Bancroft* vibrated when the pump-jet engaged, inching the boat forward. Suddenly, her tablet flashed a warning. Tapping it, she could see someone was loading a torpedo in tube three. "Engineering, this is the bridge. What're we loading in tube three? I thought we agreed torpedoes were too explosive."

"Bridge, this is Halla in Engineering. We removed the warhead as instructed. Damn near dropped it in the process, but it's stowed now. Should I not have loaded it?"

She squinted. A neutered torpedo made about as much sense as

coffee without caffeine.

Collins chimed in with an answer to her silent query. “The tracking and guidance systems are still active. Think of it like an underwater medieval battering ram, ma’am. Officer Halla figured maybe we could crack the fucker open like a walnut. I didn’t figure it could hurt.”

“Nice idea,” Hinault said. “I’ll queue it up as a failsafe.”

Since he’d come out of the brig, Collins had been swearing like a biker. She had to admit she was cussing more than normal herself, but their situation was far from textbook. Now wasn’t the time to call him out. Besides, Halla’s idea was good.

“Engineering, this is the bridge,” Hinault said. “How much longer until the final two mines are ready?”

The bridge fell silent, and except for the tapping of screens and the low hum of the ventilation, there was no response. It was eerie.

The quiet was cut short when their listening system lit up like a Christmas tree. She winced at the rainbow of lights, leaning closer to the display at her side. What she’d expected to see was the sonar beacon ping, but instead was confronted with what appeared to be seismic activity.

“Aftershock?” she muttered.

Adams shook her head. “Negative, sir. It was an explosion above us, toward the cave entrance, I think. I’m not sure from what, though.” She peered over her shoulder and returned her attention to her display.

Kel took a deep breath. Joel could take care of himself. If there was anything he was good at, it was being a CO. She checked her tablet and confirmed their connection was still hot to Engineering. Strangely, their side appeared to be muted. “Collins, is everything alright down there?”

His microphone unmuted. “Sorry, ma’am. We’ve had some technical issues with mines three and four. I regret to inform you I’ve had to use some dour language to boost morale. We’re gonna need—”

The speaker above Adams' station blared to life, interrupting Collins. It was echoing the ping they were receiving from her beacon network.

"The Hunter passed over our original starting point, Captain," Adams began. "The sonar pings aren't giving me much to work with beyond a warning, but the closer it gets, the more deets I'll be able to squeeze out of 'em."

Bringing up the sonar view, she squinted at her tablet. The display was small and inadequate, especially with her chair positioned so far from the action. In the future, when they revisited the designs for the *Bancroft*, she'd need to be firmer about moving her position closer to her people. With the smaller crew of this submersible, it made more sense. She didn't give a toss about tradition.

She leaned forward, easing off her chair. A wince escaped when her weight shifted to her left side. Where were the doc's meds when she needed them? She suppressed the pain and limped over beside Adams, sliding between her and Hinault's chairs.

The display in front of her CIS was much larger, and it was easier to take in the situation. The multicolored arcs and lines of the sonar painted a picture of the nearby beacons, as well as the shape of the cavern they'd passed through. Echoes continued to arrive as the sound bounced off distant rock formations, muddying the picture. But, surprisingly, the computer did a decent job cleaning up the signal. It was a far cry from the tech they used only a decade ago.

As the seconds ticked by, she studied the screen. After what felt like an eternity, a second sonar beacon triggered. This one was further down the descent chamber and off one of the cave branches. It looked like the Hunter was taking a guess that they went down one of the many smaller branches of the cave system.

Part of her wanted to ask Oscar how flushing out the other spy was going, but she knew he had it under control. Her attention was needed here. And while she could use her XO, her team was

functioning fine with her alone at the helm.

“Captain?” Larsson said, interrupting the silence of the bridge.

She stepped down toward him, being careful not to put too much weight on her left side as she walked. When she reached his station, she gripped both support handles and leaned with her right hip against Larsson’s chair. “Is everything okay?”

He glanced at his copilot and then returned his focus back to Kel. “Masters noticed something about the Hunter’s path, and I wanted to bring it to your attention.”

She peered around him at Masters. The co-pilot wriggled in her seat, clearly uncertain of herself. “Go ahead then.” Kel nodded.

“I... think... well—” Masters began.

“Come on now, piss or get off the pot,” Kel interrupted.

Larsson jumped in to help his fellow dolphin. “She has a theory why the Hunter may have skipped the other tunnels we passed.” He reached out and adjusted his display, pulling the shared tactical window situated between the pilots toward Kel to make it easier for her to see.

Leaning in, she could make out what appeared to be vector data with arrows moving into and out of the caves, overlaid on a heat map. It was quite a mess of detail. “What is all this?”

“It’s showing you the water currents down here in the cavern. The vectors point in the direction the water’s flowing,” Masters said.

Apparently, the young pilot was comfortable talking, just not being stared at. She’d have to make a note of that.

Masters continued. “You can see the vectors here, before we moved through the cave.” She pointed at the screen and the image changed. The heat map was muted, and the vectors were fewer and far more subtle. Some had switched directions entirely.

Kel squinted, making sense of it all. “So us passing through with our pump-jet disturbed the currents?”

“Exactly!” Masters flipped back to the up-to-date view. “That would explain why the Hunter hadn’t even bothered venturing

deeper into the cavern on the first level. It dove straight down into level two.”

Kel shook her head. “But we never traversed down there.” She studied the copilot, who’d begun fidgeting in response to her visual attention.

“Right, but... while we were descending, the pump-jet stirred up the water on that level.” Masters adjusted the display and showed a slow motion of the *Bancroft* lowering. When their pump-jet moved past the cavern entrance, the vectors exploded in yellow and red, with the water shooting in all directions.

Her mind was racing. If this theory was true, then the Hunter wouldn’t go very deep into the cave. It also meant they needed to get situated if they were going to have a fighting chance.

She nodded toward Masters. “Nice catch, dolphin. Larsson, come about and bring us into a defensive position.” She tapped her microphone, switching to the open boat channel. “All hands, this is your captain. Secure for battle stations. I repeat, secure for battle stations. Mind the articulating joints and plant your backsides in your seats.”

The overhead lights flashed red throughout the boat. What followed next was the familiar clang of hatch seals closing as they echoed through the *Bancroft* until their own hatch sealed shut. When she pivoted to check who’d done it, she caught Hinault sprinting back to his station. She hadn’t even noticed him get up. He was a spry fellow, and there wasn’t a moment of hesitation in his actions. The threat of death caused some people to fall into a stupor or a cloud of disbelief, whereas others had a heightened sense of awareness. He was clearly the latter.

With the bridge sealed, she could already tell the ventilation was different. The change was minor, but even the little things felt foreign in stressful times. The air smelled stale, with a hint of plastic. Like isolating their airflow was exercising a new part of the system that had rarely been used.

The ventilation in both the bridge and Engineering was on

separate dedicated airflow circuits from the rest of the boat. Each of the compartments had primary and secondary failover units. The rest of the boat shared oxygen and was broken into large segments with airtight sections delineating them.

The sound of the air circulating seemed louder than normal. That or it was the joints on the *Bancroft* pivoting as Larsson brought them toward the ceiling of the cavern and then turned about. They were doing their best not to stir any sediment in the cave. Despite these efforts, there was still a thick haze clouding the water.

If everything went their way, maybe the muck would settle before the Hunter arrived. They hadn't met Lady Luck since they'd started this shamle of a mission, so she wasn't betting they'd meet her anytime soon.

She leaned over and checked the clock on Adams' display. It'd been a few minutes since the drone triggered the first beacon on the upper level. Unless the Hunter was moving excruciatingly slow, the second shouldn't be much further away.

Their boat settled near the cave floor, having straightened out and backed down the cavern a safe distance from the final mine. While they couldn't camouflage themselves, getting low and angling their bow upward over the stalagmite in front of them would give them an advantage if they had to fire their torpedo as a last-ditch effort. They were in a position where they needed every option in their toolkit.

A sonar echo pinged through the bridge, breaking the building tension. The shrill sound sent a quake up her spine. She'd heard it tens of thousands of times over her career, but none of them were as piercing as sonar on a battlefield. When its location flashed on Adams' controls, the direness of their situation hit her like a sucker punch to the gut.

The Hunter had turned around. It dropped straight to their cave's entrance and was making its way toward them. And from the looks of it, the drone wasn't wasting time.

It's the Hope that Kills You



Hunter, of her favorite instructor's saying on Dartmouth's reminder screen and seeing the instructor's appeal on Dartmouth's display. Doctor Sagan's scraggly beard was his one sign of no longer being in the military. He used to tell his class that it was hope that killed you. Be it the hope that you'd get a good grade, or hope that you'd luck out and the enemy would make a mistake.

She'd indulged in the luxury of hope more times than she could count. But despite years of wisdom and constant training, that very hope had weakened her when it mattered most.

Hope hadn't helped her through Dartmouth or those first few years as a dolphin. There was no hope behind her blood, sweat, and tears she poured into this new submersible design. And hope didn't help when she caught her husband cheating. Although, for all she knew, that might've been the name of the tramp he was sleeping with. That would've been quite the cosmic coincidence.

The concussive explosions of the mines were amplified by the computers on the bridge, jolting Kel out of her thought spiral. Coming to and studying Adams' display, she noted that the drone had triggered the first mine on their level. Judging from the depth they'd placed the ordnance at, and where the Hunter's dot was on their sonar display, she wasn't expecting a direct hit. However, it should've been close enough to slow it down.

The next sonar beacon closer to their position pinged, highlighting the Hunter. Her stomach tightened as she noticed that

the velocity was unaffected. Like it knew exactly where they were.

“Reverse engines full and turn on all the bubblers around the *Bancroft* on maximum!” Kel slapped her hand against the back of Adams’ chair. The American CIS flinched and practically fell into her controls.

“But, Captain.” Larsson pivoted toward her. “That’ll—”

“Just do it!” she screamed, pulling on the pole to move closer.

Where Larsson had questioned her, Masters hadn’t. In the seconds that followed, she leaned forward and slapped the button to engage the bubblers, then slid the lever upward to maximum. She assumed control of the *Bancroft* and engaged the reverse pump-jet drive, angling the nose downward, so they didn’t back into the cavern floor.

“What are we doing, ma’am?” Hinault asked. “Won’t that give us away?”

She squeezed the bar beside Masters. “It knows we’re in here. Our coxswain said as much herself. We left a trail of disturbed sediment throughout the caverns, and the deeper we go, the longer the trail. Arm torpedo three!” She glanced to her right.

Hinault froze, his hands resting in his lap.

Kel squinted at him. Maybe he hadn’t heard her. “Officer Hinault! I said, arm torpedo three!”

He still didn’t respond. It was almost as if the fire she’d seen earlier had been extinguished. Like it’d been doused with water and had never been anything more than surface deep. He was wobbling out. She’d seen it earlier and ignored it.

“Officer Hinault! I gave you a direct order. Arm torpedo three!” Her voice was firm and focused, but his response was unchanged. He simply stared at her with a vacant expression.

As she took a step towards him, he leaned back, his eyes narrowing. “Don’t come any closer!”

He was losing it, and they didn’t have time for this nonsense. Not now.

Her mind raced through her options until it settled on one:

Molly. She'd stashed her pistol in the pocket of the command chair earlier, and with all the commotion, she'd forgotten. Unless Oscar had moved it, it should still be there. With her hands raised defensively, she took several slow steps backward until her hip made contact with her chair.

"Let's not do anything rash." She slowly lowered her hand to her side.

When Hinault's attention shifted to something on his controls, she discreetly reached behind her back, feeling around the pocket of her chair. Her fingers soon met the cold, unmistakable curve of the pistol she'd stashed there. The modified Glock 19 was familiar to the touch. She'd discharged this particular weapon more times aboard this boat than during her entire career on board a naval submersible.

She brought the pistol around, training it on Hinault. He glanced sideways at her, his eyes widening.

"What the hell?" He raised his hands in surrender. "Don't shoot."

She tapped the back of Adams' chair. "Assume control of Hinault's station and arm that bloody torpedo."

"Aye, Captain," Adams reached over to use his controls and peered over her shoulder. "Holy crap!" escaped from her lips as her gaze locked onto the gun.

Hinault shook his head. "I can't let you stop this, ma'am. He после того, что ты с ним сделал. This is bigger than you. We've sacrificed too much. Co—"

Kel yanked the trigger. She'd heard enough; there wasn't time for second-guessing herself. Throughout her career, she'd listened to countless transmissions underwater, and she'd heard enough to know he had just spoken Russian. She didn't know what he'd said, but she didn't care, either. If you'd asked her an hour ago whether Hinault was on the wrong side, she would have laughed. But in that moment, there was no hesitation in pulling the trigger. She didn't wonder or hope if she was doing the right thing; she simply knew.

The bang of the rubber bullet echoed through the confined space of the bridge like a firecracker exploding next to her ear. For the second time in as many hours, the firing of a weapon under her command sparked lightning bolts of pain through her head and sent her world spinning.

Except for the ringing, everything else was muted.

She closed her eyes and reached up, rubbing her ear with her left hand. It didn't help.

When she opened her eyes and pulled her hand away, the room had stopped careening. Adams was now waving her hands at her, trying to get her attention. She was frantically pointing at Hinault and running her hand across her throat.

Kel looked down. He was still conscious. In fact, he was grasping something under his controls. Maybe she'd missed him; it was hard to tell.

As she took a step forward with the gun held out, the room flipped and started spinning again. Her legs buckled. The bridge was moving in slow motion, like the bad stop-motion animation her kids used to make.

She had to immobilize him. If he did something to the computer or her crew, they'd be dead for sure. Without thinking, she leaned against the pole beside her chair, bringing her other hand up to steady her aim. The gun felt like a brick, but the heft helped lower it and train it squarely at the back of the bastard's head.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Adams covering her ears with her hands. The woman appeared to be screaming something, but Kel couldn't make it out. She simply squeezed the trigger. Except this time she eased her finger back, being sure she didn't flinch and ensuring her aim remained true.

Hinault's head snapped forward, and darkness engulfed the only sense she had left.

As she crashed to the floor, she rolled onto her back and stared up at the ceiling. The overhead lights faded in and out, and she could just make out shadows moving nearby, but for some reason,

she couldn't focus on them.

In that moment of eerie silence, she was finally able to focus since her other senses were failing. Shooting that gun may have been a terrible mistake, one of many she'd made in recent months, and perhaps her last.

Hinault. The bastard had screwed them over. He must've been in cahoots with Müller. How the hell had she missed it?

"Captain!" a voice echoed. "Can you hear me? For Christ's sake, wake up."

It sounded like Larsson. His blurry face appeared overhead, and he was animated about something.

"I can't get into his controls," Adams said. "The snake locked us out."

"What... do we do now?" Masters blurted out, her voice shaking. "We're completely boxed in by this silt, and I can't see jack. It's like someone threw a blindfold over our sensors. Why'd cap screw us over like this? We're sitting ducks for that blasted Hunter."

The words faded in and out, but their meaning was clear. They hadn't fired the torpedo yet. Hope was lost.

There it was again. That godforsaken word. As Doctor Sagan called it, the bane of any officer's command was hope.

Kel could feel her anger building, forcing her hand and body to act. She reached up to her ear and activated her microphone. God willing, it should still be connected to Engineering.

"Collins..." The word was like sandpaper to her throat.

"Captain?" Collins asked, hesitation leaking into each syllable. "Is that you?"

She cleared her throat, sending sparks of agony throughout her entire body. "Fire... fire torpedo... three."

Commotion ensued around her and on the other end of the line, both from her words and the loud bangs echoing from the aft side of the bridge. Someone was trying to break in. But that didn't make any sense. They hadn't even locked the door. Either way, each

thunk was like someone lifting her head and crashing it against the floor. The pain was excruciating.

She struggled to keep herself awake, to see if Collins had fired the torpedo, but the tug of darkness was too strong. The strain was too overpowering.

The odds were stacked against her, and there was no turning back. Hope hadn't prevailed.

To hell with hope!

She didn't live her life hoping for Lady Luck to find her.

Live or die, she was the architect of her own fate.

Yankee Doodle



V pulled through her head. They clipped away like the barbed wire of her dreamlike state. Each word tore another hole through her comfortable illusion, exposing the harsh reality around her and prodding her awake.

“Bloody hell,” Kel muttered. “Please... stop... screaming.”

The voices ceased and then transitioned to a whisper. While far less jarring, it still felt as if they were repeatedly flicking the side of her head with their fingers each time they spoke.

She struggled to make out the words. It sounded like Doc was talking to someone. Two someones. But she dared not look at her surroundings. Not yet.

“Where... am I?” She flipped over onto her back and immediately regretted the movement. A dunk-tank of nausea washed over her.

Kel brought her hand to her mouth and her eyes shot open. She was in her quarters. Driven by the searing pain of the light assaulting her eyes, she lurched toward her loo, emptying her stomach just in time. Either she was dealing with an intense hangover, or she’d... realization washed over her as she flushed away the bile.

Only after the chunky remnants of her last meal swirled down did she wonder if she should have flushed. They’d been running silent for weeks, and she’d forgotten about the protocols.

“Are you okay?” Doc Hansen asked, gently placing her hand against Kel’s back.

Her touch was warm, almost magical. She hadn’t realized how cold she was until now. As Kel brought her arms to her chest, she was greeted with a blanket. “Thank you,” she muttered, tightening it around herself. Then, she reached out, hoping someone would help her up.

A burst of commotion erupted in her ready room, followed by a dull thud. A second later, a hand met hers and gently pulled her up. It was soft yet firm. Opening her eyes, she saw it was Klein, her new Bull Nuke. Not at all who she’d expected. “Thanks.” Her voice sounded like she was speaking with marbles in her mouth.

He nodded, keeping his arm in place to steady her. “No problem... ma’am.”

She glanced around her quarters. The door to her personal area was propped open with a chair, and from the looks of it, someone had been sitting with her for quite a while. As Klein helped her step over the threshold of the hatch, she eased her foot into the ready room, pausing briefly before entering.

Empty ration containers and cups were piled in one corner, and both seats on opposite sides of the room were pulled out. Judging by the bottles spread around them, they too had been there a while.

“We’ll have someone come clean these in a minute,” Oscar said. His gaze was fixed on Klein, not Kel.

He’d been so quiet that she hadn’t even noticed him standing to her left. It was like he’d tucked himself into the corner. “Don’t fret about it.” Kel swallowed hard. Her throat was as dry as a desert. “Have...” She shook her head and pointed at her mouth.

A cup was in front of her in a flash. The doctor was quick and knew exactly what she needed.

“Take your time.” Doc Hansen supported the bottom of the cup with her hand as Kel tilted its contents down her throat. “Your other senses might be heightened for a while. After you mucked up your hearing, everything else fought to fill in the gaps. Now your

body's struggling to straighten it all out. It's the stimulants we put in the water to enhance our cognition down here. I've been questioning their use for years, but the studies are conclusive. It helps with the wibbles."

Oscar snickered. "The wibbles are the least of our worries."

She tipped the cup back. Only when it was empty did she lower it and try to speak again. "Bashing my head, my hip, and firing on two of my officers in a confined space didn't help, either."

Doc Hansen nodded. "Ah, yes. Now that explains the Australian-sized bruise on your side. I was gonna ask where that came from."

Kel ran her hand over her hip and suddenly felt exposed. It was then that she realized she wasn't wearing her uniform. She was in a sweatsuit.

"Don't worry." Doc Hansen leaned forward. "Your checkups were always in private, ma'am. Only I was present." She took the empty cup from Kel, refilled it at the sink, and handed it back once full.

Kel closed her eyes. "Thank you." She took a deep breath and then brought the cup up for another swig, quickly emptying the contents down her throat. As she lowered it, she froze.

There, on the wall screens, was a map of the cavern system. It was far more intricate than she remembered. Nooks and crannies spidered out for kilometer after kilometer in all directions. Every direction except up. From the position of their marker, they'd relocated the *Bancroft*.

The more she studied the image, the more perplexed she became. At the bottom of the display, over seven thousand meters deep, a flashing question mark with a countdown caught her eye. The numbers seemed to indicate they had just under twenty-four hours for something. The more she stared, the less it made sense. She pointed at the number and opened her mouth to speak.

"That... that I can't explain, but some of it I can." Oscar pushed up off the ground and squeezed past her, sliding up next to the display. "We haven't been sitting idle. We moved the *Bancroft* a few

times. First to a safer and easier to defend location in the cavern, and then again later to..." His words trailed off incoherently. He shook his head. "In any case, we were exploring our surroundings. We've only been in this spot for... a few hours now."

She closed her eyes and rubbed at them with her free hand. The screen was too bright to stare at for long. Passing out hadn't been her finest moment, and being alive was far more agonizing than she last remembered. While she'd hoped they'd survive the Hunter, she truly feared the worst after Hinault's actions. All she could think about was that the bastard better be dead. If he wasn't, she'd kill him herself.

When she lowered her hand, she glanced at Oscar. He looked like a mummy covered in bandages. "What on earth happened to you?" She tilted her head, only now realizing what he was holding. "And... why are you holding my firearm?"

He stiffened his posture, his eyes never leaving Klein. "Now that... that's a yarn."

"Blimey, how long was I out for?" She wasn't sure she wanted to hear the answer, but she needed to know.

"Long enough for the world to be flipped upside down. Oh yeah, and to clean up the mess Toby made all over Hinault. Apparently, our cat was downright frightened. He lost a few lives and stunk up the bridge in the process, making it look like the poor lad pissed his drawers." Oscar forced a smile.

She snickered at the vision of the virtual cat piddling on her former warfare officer and then stiffened. He must have done it when she pulled the gun on him. "Is he...?"

"Alive? Yes, unfortunately." Oscar leaned against the back wall of her ready room, making sure the gun was always in plain sight.

"Pity Maggie didn't have real bullets." Kel stared down at her hands. She could almost feel the shadow of the pistol in her palm and the echo of her index finger squeezing the trigger.

"I assume that's the name of your gun, then?" Oscar asked.

"Yeah." She rubbed her hand against her trousers, trying to rid

herself of the gun's lingering effects. "She's got a kick to her. Like a mule. You know, Maggie the Mule."

Oscar nodded, glancing briefly at her and then back to Klein. "Well, we're lucky it wasn't loaded with real bullets. If it were, we might not be here." He tilted his head at Klein. "He might not, either. Though, maybe that would be better than the alternative."

Kel squinted. Oscar wasn't being himself, and he was talking in riddles. Something seriously messed up must have happened while she was under.

Klein exhaled and rocked back and forth. "We're trapped a half dozen clicks below the surface in a cave with no exit, while the world is crumbling around us. Yeah... luck. That's it."

She tilted her head, studying her Bull Nuke. "What does that mean?"

He cast a pointed glance at Oscar. "Go on then. You're the XO now. Tell her how her ex-Yankee man cocked it up, and everything went to pot."

Oscar chuckled. "Stuff it, Klein, you traitorous twit."

Klein lurched forward, but Oscar was ready for him. He tilted sideways, dodging the man's slow jab, and then grabbed his wrist, thrusting it up behind his back. He then brought his arm, still holding the gun, up and under his neck, shoving him backward and slamming him into the wall with a muted thud.

She'd never seen Oscar move so quickly. By the time she reacted to Klein's movement, he was already pinned. It was like the world was moving in fast-forward, and she was stuck on pause. When she looked at Klein, his face was turning white, and his free hand was grasping at Oscar's arm against his neck. He was struggling to pull it away.

"I... can't... breathe," Klein said, failing to gasp for air.

Whatever had happened while she was under must have pushed Oscar over the edge. Maybe he was as broken as she was. The man was usually as stoic as a rock. It was annoying sometimes, but to see this much venom was unheard of.

The light flashed, and a muted knock came from the other side of the hatch. With the sound dampening inside her ready room, for them to hear Klein's collision reaffirmed how hard he'd been slammed against the wall. In fact, his face was turning from white to purple.

"Don't kill him." She reached her hand up and rested it on Oscar's arm covered in bandages. His bicep was a rock. "Not yet anyhow. I need to know what happened."

Oscar's lip twitched. His glare was burning through his former right-hand man in Engineering. He relaxed his arm against Klein's neck ever so slightly, allowing him to breathe, or at least gasp for some air.

She rubbed her face. Waking up to Klein being an asshole wasn't on her top ten list. Not after he'd stepped up and allowed Oscar to be her XO. "Should we have him confined in the Brig?"

"I have a better idea," Oscar began. "Considering he and Collins started this whole mutiny nonsense while you were out of the picture, I say we flush him."

Kel recoiled and spun her head toward Klein. "Is he for real?"

"It's not like you've been the model of leadership, passing out like a bit—"

She brought her right hand up and rounded on Klein in the blink of an eye, interrupting his dramatic speech. His head snapped to the side, and his eyes rolled into the back of his head. She'd knocked him out. While his face had returned to its original paleness, the color on his left cheek was quickly replaced with a deep purple-red welt that was rising rapidly.

Oscar eased his limp body down the hatch to the floor, having released the arm pinned behind him. When his butt reached the ground, a metallic scraping sound broke the silence. Oscar rolled him over and pulled a knife from the small of Klein's back. It was loose; the sheath having already been unlatched.

"The sodding git!" Oscar turned over the blade in his hand. "I gave Collins this knife a few years ago for Christmas. He must have

stashed it in here, and Klein grabbed it when we weren't watching him. That must've been why Collins wanted in here so bad."

If Oscar hadn't pinned Klein and cut off his windpipe, Kel could be dead. They both could be.

She stared at his limp body, her mind spinning in circles. "What the blazes happened while I was under?" Her legs started shaking, and she suddenly felt weak. As she leaned down, she collapsed into the waiting metal chair.

Oscar pulled at Klein, turning him over to check for more weapons. When he was content there were no further threats, he snatched the sheath and slid the knife back inside. He then pocketed the blade and shoved Klein's limp body into the corner, facing the wall.

He leaned toward the edge of the hatch and pressed the flashing green button. "Bring me some restraints."

"Aye, sir," the voice on the other side said. It sounded as if it could have been Adams, but it was hard to tell with her head still reeling.

He released the button and turned around to face her. His shoulders were slumped, and he looked knackered. Like he hadn't slept in days. Add to that the sea of bandages covering his body, and he could have come off the front lines in Alaska. An unusual sight for a submariner.

"Take a seat." She gestured toward the seat on the far wall.

He slid down onto the hard surface with a sigh, careful to keep the pistol at the ready in case Klein woke up. "I don't even know where to begin." He rubbed his left hand against his leg, wincing as he did.

She smiled. "How about you start where I passed out?"

Interlude

The Builders

He contemplated this. This is why life in this one-dimensional space-time is impractical. They will never elevate themselves to Builders. Never!" He pointed at Kel's face lingering in the portal. "They only live as oneself, along a single time axis, and from a solitary frame of reference. Even with all their cameras, relying on another person's interpretation of events leaves holes and opportunities for chaos, or as Ares knows all too well, to introduce subterfuge."

Willow cracked a smile. One minute he thinks the captain is masterful, and the next he thinks she's an imbecile. As if all actions were logical with Builders, let alone humans.

He paused and stared at her. "Come on! How did she not know that repeatedly firing a weapon in close range would render her mortal body unconscious? And if she were truly the captain of her life and vessel, how did she not see through the lies of her crew? The body language, the breathing, hell, even the insubordination should have ended any one of them."

Willow shook her head. He was as short-sighted as all Builders. Except for Hera; she wasn't bad. She straightened her back. "An iron fist fails to yield roses."

"And roses fail to protect you from an arrow to the heart." His lips curled into a sinister smirk, a dark glint flashing in his eyes.

"Very well. Leave!" Willow shot her hand into the air, toward the space-time gate through which he'd arrived. She was growing

tired of her fellow Builder's limited perspective. He'd become jaded like the others and was blind to improving himself. No one wanted to be replaced, least of all a Builder.

"No. I will not." He crossed his arms. "You cannot make me."

The gesture was amusing. It reminded her of a human infant, but she couldn't tell him that. Ironically, if she did, he'd lose his temper in a fit of anger. And if she knew him, he'd cause her unimaginable pain for sure.

"I refuse to relent," he began. "There's something more to these..." he waved his hands, "... hu-mans. There has to be. Otherwise, you're wasting your potential in dimensional space when you could be enjoying eternity with the rest of us."

Sitting still on one's ass wasn't her idea of fun. As Builders, there were things they should be doing but weren't. At least, they weren't. She was trying to solve their problem. Even eternity had an end, and unless they worked toward improving themselves, they wouldn't survive much longer.

"They're not as erratic as you think, and it's their mortality that would make them the perfect Builders. Here..." She raised her hand and tweaked the dimension counterclockwise, rotating the timeline backward a few hours. Once done, she tapped Oscar's lifemark, changing to his perspective. "Let's see if his account of the situation was as flawed as you believe."

Act II

“Gluttony kills more than the sword.” — George Herbert

The Hatch



The still ringing in Oster's ears, with such a stark reminder of the potential disaster unfolding behind the sealed door. Every fiber of his being reverberated with the effort, his aged muscles screaming in protest. But the hatch remained maddeningly immobile. Deep down, he knew his attempts were in vain, yet he harbored a flicker of hope that the clamor would summon someone, anyone, from inside. It wasn't just about breaking through anymore; it was about discovering the truth of the shot, confronting his fears that lay just beyond the metal barrier.

And then, amidst the din of his futile efforts, a sudden idea flashed through his mind.

He spun around and shouted loud enough for his team to hear him below deck. "Someone get me a blasted torch from Engineering!"

Maybe, just maybe, if he cut the bulkhead on the side, he could slice through the hinges and knock the door off.

The sound of feet stomping into the distance toward the aft end of the boat meant someone was on it. Müller's cackling laughter echoed in his mind as he waited. She was a traitorous excuse for a human, and she was all he could think about, especially now.

He'd heard the gunshot as he was climbing the ladder. While he figured it was Kel's gun, he couldn't forget Müller's words: "Hinault will deliver us to Китай."

She'd been colluding with the warfare officer the entire time. They knew Kel had a soft spot for oxygen thieves. She always had. The stress of being on a boat had almost broken her when she was a new dolphin, and had he not stepped into the picture, she might have tossed in the towel. Apparently, word got around about their captain, and they used her feelings to slither up and gain her trust.

The familiar whoosh of the torpedo bay shook him out of his thoughts. Collins must have fired it. That meant either someone on the bridge told him to, or he was acting on his own. Either way, there was hope Kel was still alive.

He pushed off the hatch and closed the distance to the ladder in an impossible number of steps. When he came upon it, he slid down in one swooping motion. It was like a firefighter sprinting out of bed and down the pole toward an awaiting engine. He needed to talk to Collins. He needed to know if Kel was okay.

The gap from the ladder to Weapons was around fifty meters. They were the longest meters of his life. As he opened hatch after hatch, he expected to find someone on the other side ready to deliver the devastating news. Fortunately, when he swung open the final barrier leading to Weapons, the message never came.

This hatch matched the ones on the bridge. They were locked, and the hinges were on the inside. He slammed his fist against the solid metal. The dull thunk echoed on the other side. While he appreciated the utilitarian design of the *Bancroft*, right then, he wished there was a way to force the damn thing open.

The sharp clang and ticking of the door wheel sent his heart racing. When it clicked and swung inward, the stinging smell of sweat and explosives wafted out, throwing him off. He'd forgotten they'd been busy tearing apart the torpedoes to reduce their explosiveness.

"Hey, Oscar." Collins mopped at his forehead with the cloth, smearing dirt across his face and into his silvering hair.

"The... torpedo." Oscar panted and swallowed hard.

"Tore the piss out of that Hunter drone." He wiped his hands on

the cloth. "I miss the good old days of men fighting men in the ocean. We never sent a robot to do a man's job. Back then, killing required more than hitting go on a program."

The last thing he needed was another lecture from the twat. "Who ordered you to fire? Have you heard from...?" He didn't say her name. Not out of disrespect, but more out of fear. Kel had been the daughter he never had, and losing her wasn't about to happen. Not on his watch.

Collins narrowed his gaze. "The captain ordered us to. I didn't question it."

Halla chuckled. "You didn't push the button either, did ya?" She glared at Collins. "Tore me a new one, he did."

"Shut it!" Collins glanced over his shoulder, shooting daggers at the engineering technician before he turned to face Oscar. "I assume something on the bridge was on the fritz, so we took aim from down here and rammed the fucker."

Oscar smiled. He'd figure out what Halla was talking about later. More importantly, Kel could still be alive. Or she should be. "Was it before or after the gunshot?"

Collins froze and slowly angled his head. "What gunshot? I didn't hear a gunshot down here."

"Damnnit!" Oscar spun around and snatched the headset off the dolphin, staring at both of them, slack-jawed. He held it up to his ear and pressed the button on the side. "Bridge, this is XO Allen in Weapons. Are you there?"

No one answered earlier when he'd tried. Ever since the hatches had closed, the communications throughout the boat were down. He wasn't even sure how they were still working in Weapons, but he wasn't about to question it.

The voice of Larsson replied. "Weapons, this is the bridge! You're five by five, sir!"

He flinched at the screaming voice playing through the tiny speaker. "Bridge, there's no need to scream. What's your status?" He wanted to ask about the captain but didn't want to assume the

worst.

“Sorry, sir,” Larsson began. “We’re all a bit frazzled up here, and our ears are ringing. The captain fired off a few more rounds in close quarters, and my head’s still loopy.”

“She discharged a fuckin’ gun on the bridge?” Collins muttered. “That’s mad.”

Oscar swallowed hard. Collins wasn’t wrong. She’d already fired it once; firing it again was ludicrous. “Kel, is she...”

“Captain Williams passed out, and Doc Hansen’s here taking care of her. When I opened the aft hatch, she was waiting there with a cutting torch. I ’bout shat myself at the sight of that.”

He chuckled. That must have been who he’d heard running toward Engineering. “But she’s okay?”

“Yessir. So far... sir.”

Collins rubbed the back of his neck with his cloth. “Who’d she shoot?”

“Hinault, I assume,” Oscar said.

“Yessir.” Larsson’s voice quivered. “How’d you know?”

Oscar straightened up. “A traitorous birdie told me.”

Collins froze and tilted his head, studying him.

“Open the forward hatch,” Oscar began. “I’m coming up.” He took off the headpiece without waiting for an acknowledgment.

“Who’s the tweety bird?” Collins stared down and started neatly folding the cloth into a square.

“Müller.” Oscar spat on the ground.

“No shit?” Collins went about wiping the rest of the grime off his arms.

For a man of many words, it was strange hearing him say so little. Especially when it came to women. Everyone but his mother knew how he felt about the opposite sex serving in the navy.

Oscar turned and marched toward the aft ladder leading up to the bridge. As he reached for the rungs, he paused, hearing footsteps behind him. “Why don’t you stay down here and make sure we’re prepared for whatever else they might throw at us?”

After a lengthy silence, Collins finally replied. “All right. I mean, yes, sir.”

Oscar took a deep breath and began his ascent, climbing rung by rung toward the bridge. Throughout his career, he’d always been on the receiving end of such directives, but for once, the tables had turned. He had always wanted to put Collins in his place; his rank had just never granted him the authority to do so. Until now.

Speaking in Tongues



A world where death through the desperation reigned. Bridges, the of blood, sweat, and urine hung heavy in the air, assaulting his senses with its vile potency. He gagged, fighting the urge to expel his lunch, and forced down the bile rising in his throat. Once he stabilized his stomach, he raised his eyes to take in the faces of the skeleton crew.

The normally concentrated faces of the officers on duty were frazzled. Their eyes darted around the room and landed on him when he entered. By now, they should be hyper-focused on the tasks in front of them, but at that moment, they weren't. It took them a few seconds to realize who he was before they reacted.

"XO on the deck!" Adams winced as the words came out far louder than she'd intended.

"At ease." He gestured with his hands downward, making certain to keep his voice low. "I'm sure y'all could use being relieved. We'll take care of that in a bit. First, I have to see the captain."

Masters pointed aft over her shoulder. "Doc Hansen and Larson carried her to the captain's quarters, sir."

"Thank you." He took a step and then froze. "Do you need me for anything? I'll be right back."

Masters glanced from Larsson to Adams and then back to him. "Other than some aspirin and a shot of Jack, no, sir."

He smiled and dipped his head before working his way aft. Spoken like a true dolphin who was fit for anything.

As he approached Kel's quarters, he paused at the entrance. The hatch was open, and the ready room appeared to be empty except for Kel. There was something odd about it. He'd never seen it ajar like that before.

Leaning forward, he saw her lying on her bunk in her quarters on the far side. While her face wasn't visible, she wasn't moving either. He stepped over the hatch threshold and into the ready room. When he was just shy of passing into her cabins, Doc Hansen cracked open the door to the captain's tiny washroom.

She wiped her hands on a washcloth and tossed it back in the basin behind her. "Oh, hey, Oscar... I mean, sir."

He waved his hands through the air. "Screw the formalities, Ellen. Talk to me. How's Kel? Is she okay?"

"Sure, yeah." Hansen slid up to Kel's side and sat on the chair next to her bed. "She's a tough one. Went and gave herself a double concussion shooting that stupid gun again. Her vitals are low. Steady, but low. I won't know if she sustained any prolonged hearing damage until she wakes up. But judging from the others out there, she probably lost some."

"But... she'll survive, right?" He wrung his hands together.

She shrugged. "I think so. I'm not set up with advanced medical gear to do scans beyond broken bones. Like I said, we'll know when she wakes up."

When. He knew that was better than 'if'. "Any idea how long that'll be?"

"No. It could be ten minutes or ten days. I'll monitor her vitals and keep her alive with what I've got. But, Oscar, we need to get her to a proper hospital."

His stomach tightened. "Then we have to get out of these damn caves." He spun around and stepped toward the entrance, pausing just outside. "I don't want anyone in her quarters. Is that understood?"

Ellen tilted her head. "Is everything okay?"

"Is that understood, Doctor?"

She swallowed hard and stood up, grabbing the hatch door to close it. "Yessir."

He sighed. "Let me know the moment anything changes."

She nodded. "I will."

He was only a meter away when he heard the latch on her ready room click shut and the whirl of the locks sealing it tight. No one beyond him and the doctor could get inside short of someone cutting off his hand.

When he walked up behind the three remaining officers on the bridge, their whispering stopped. "What's up, people? And please don't tell me nothing."

Larsson leaned forward and glanced at the others. "We'd prefer not to be relieved until the end of our shift if it's alright with you, sir."

Their no-quit attitude was admirable, but it was their health he was worried about. He stepped backward and grabbed one of Kel's spare earpieces out of her chair. He'd left his piece down in the galley.

"Let's see how you hold up." He adjusted the headset. "We don't know what we're dealing with, and the last thing I need is our primaries getting decommissioned. It's bad enough you hurt your hearing. Seeing your captain down for the count couldn't have helped."

"At least she took out Hinault," Larsson said. "The git was taking us all down. He was loopy, speaking in tongues and the like."

"It wasn't tongues, stupid." Adams shook her head. "It was Russian. I mean, it sounded like Russian."

He scratched at his arm and winced. When he looked down, there was a gash across his forearm, and it was covered in dried blood. Somewhere along the way, he must have cut himself and not realized it. He'd deal with that later. "Well, that's interesting. What did he say?"

Adams shrugged. "Something something you did something. I'd have to hear it again. I was sorta pissing myself with a gun being held over my head and all."

"No, it was Hinault pissing himself." Masters chuckled.

"Speaking of piss. Let's fix that." He pressed the button on his headset. "This is your XO. I need some soapy water and a sponge up here on the bridge. We've got a mess that needs cleaning up."

Gianna's voice broke in first. "Bridge, this is the galley. I'll have someone up there in a blink. And sir, what should we do about our... people down here?"

Blast. He'd forgotten about them. They had rounded up a dozen weapons engineers over three shifts to dig for another traitor and come up empty. Not due to a lack of screaming and threatening, though.

"Let 'em go. Tell them to get some sleep."

"Sir?" Gianna asked.

He swallowed hard. "We found our second accomplice. Stand down and give everyone my apologies for rustling them up. I'll do the same later."

"Aye, sir." She cut the line.

The knot in the pit of his stomach tightened. He wasn't sure if it was from the urine smell or something else entirely. Either way, he needed to take control of their situation.

He stepped up beside Larsson and Masters and cleared his throat. "Status report?"

"Yessir," Masters began. "We took out the Hunter with our battering ram torpedo and are still holding our position in the silt cloud we turned up. We haven't detected additional sonar activity in the cavern in over fifteen minutes."

"How the heck did we even hit that thing with a torpedo? That's like threading a needle in the dark with your eyes closed."

She chuckled. "Weapons adjusted the guidance system to be drawn primarily to heat. While the dust scattered the energy signature, the Hunter drone was working overtime to clear the

cloud the captain had raised. It was enough to give the torpedo something to zero in on.”

“I’ll be,” he muttered, staring at the remains of the drone on the floor of the cavern. The image was being displayed on both of the coxswain’s control panels.

“I’m still kicking myself for not doing as she ordered,” Larsson stared down at his hands.

Masters thwacked him on the shoulder. “That’s why Toby and I are more leet than you. Him for pissing on Hinault, and me for following orders without hesitation. I had no idea what the captain was doing raising all that dust, but I wasn’t about to question her like you did. I’ve got kids back home, and I prefer to stay alive as long as possible.”

He wouldn’t have thought to use the sediment to their advantage against the Hunter. Not in a million years. Sub commanders didn’t exactly train for cavern warfare.

Kel’s brain had always worked in weird ways. It was something he’d recognized decades ago when she was teetering on the edge of wobbling out. He’d have to ask her later where she got the idea from.

He stepped back and tapped the display overhead, panning over their map of the cave system. “I’m not keen on sitting around and waiting for another robotic guest. What can we do to change our position to something a bit more... defensible?”

The maze of caverns with their endless twists and turns and one-way nooks was mind-numbing. He’d trained for open ocean confrontations, not this spelunking nonsense. It was like staring at a video game.

“The sooner we get to our destination, the sooner our trail settles,” Larsson said. “Someone just tell me where to go, and I’ll take us there.”

When he returned his attention to Adams, she was quietly but efficiently scanning through the same map he was. She, however, was doing more than aimless wandering. She was plotting a course.

Watching her was like seeing an artist painting a masterpiece. Her motions and command over her controls were both fluid and purposeful. By the time she finished, all eyes were on her screen.

She glanced over her shoulder and froze at everyone staring at her. "What?"

"Nothing." He shook his head and tilted it toward her screen. "Whatcha got?"

Her cheeks flushed pink, and she turned back to face what she'd created. "I ran a three-dimensional stochastic fractal search algorithm against the routes we've mapped, combined with the scattered sonar echoes we recorded during the Hunter encounter. I then weighted the different paths based on the difficulty of navigating the caverns. When that finished, I applied a multiplier based on our ability to make evasive maneuvers en route. You know, in case we were forced into another skirmish."

She was speaking gibberish to him. Give him a nautical map, and he could read it in his sleep, but the computers on board the *Bancroft* brought an entirely new approach to underwater combat and navigation.

He sighed and studied Larsson and Masters. They were nodding along, reminding him again he was truly out of his element. "So, in English you..." He motioned with his hands, waving toward himself.

Adams grinned. "I ran a search to find our optimal hiding spot, sir."

"Well, shit. Just say that next time."

The three young officers laughed out loud. It was mostly at his expense, but it was still good to hear laughter. It'd been over a week since he'd heard the melodious sounds of the crew.

"The search returned this destination. It's quite a ways into the cave system, but the location is easy to defend. And we can plant some sonar beacons along the way, giving us plenty of time to—"

"Do you think we should check topside first?" he interrupted.

She stared down at her hands and started fiddling with her

rings.

“Spit it out, Officer.” He stood up straight and eyed each of them. “You’ve all earned a great deal of latitude after everything you’ve been through. Speak your minds. You’re not going to offend me.”

“We’d be walking in disadvantaged, sir,” Larsson blurted out.

Masters nodded. “Whoever’s up there has the element of surprise, and we need to find a way to flip the table.”

“Besides...” Adams brought up the shaft they’d lowered down on the screen above her head. There were engineering angles of descent from the submarines overlaid on the graphic. “There’s not a chance in Hades they’re coming down to get us. Neither a Virginia-class submarine nor that old modded Soviet November job the Africans are sporting can make it down to our depth. Not only is the tunnel too narrow, they can’t exactly lower at ninety degrees. Whatever they send our way is only going to be a drone or tethered submersible.”

Masters raised her palm outward. “So, we’re safer down here then.”

“She just said that.” Larsson chuckled.

“Make it happen,” he interrupted, nodding his head toward Adams. “Like I said. I trust you.”

She smiled. “Thank you, sir.”

They turned and began the task of navigating their way to the destination Adams had plotted out.

Never in his career had he been in an encounter where they chose to hide once they were detected. You either ran, or you went at them head on. While the tactics weren’t familiar, he couldn’t argue with the logic. It also helped that the three of them had a consensus. That quelled his doubts.

If this were a nuclear reactor or the pump-jet drive, he could fix it. Those were logical. Tactics and strategy weren’t something he regularly found a need for. Like all things rarely used, his strategic muscles had atrophied.

Now that the bridge was in order, he needed to check on the rest of the boat, starting with Weapons. He stepped backward to Kel's console and plugged in his headset before tapping the tablet to open a connection to Collins.

He then cleared his throat. "Weapons, this is the bridge."

An unexpected dolphin answered back. "Bridge, this is Marín in Weapons. Go ahead."

Oscar unplugged and went wireless as he eased sideways and leaned over Hinault's old seat. The reek of urine wafted through his nostrils. "Marín? I wasn't expecting to hear your voice down there. Where's Collins?"

"Ditto that, Nuke. I've had enough of you screaming at me a challenging my bloody patriotism for a lifetime."

"Cut the insubordinate crap, Marín. We're not in some dodgy pub. We're slap bang the middle of a battlefield and this isn't the time nor the place. Now, I'll ask you again. Where—the—blazes—is—Collins?"

The line clicked and fell silent. A moment later, she unmuted her end. "The guys say he was mumbling to himself after you left. About five minutes later, he up and disappeared. He wasn't here when I arrived, either."

The pit in his stomach tightened. He didn't know why, but something about Collins wasn't sitting well. "Do me a favor and lock down Weapons. You don't answer to anyone except me or the captain, is that understood?"

"Aw, come on! I only dropped in here because—"

"Ana!" Oscar straightened up and squeezed the back of Hinault's chair. "That's a direct order. Are you gonna piss on your Marín family name? Your father won't take too kindly to hearing about this, now will he?"

"Really?" The sound of her slamming something metallic down boomed in his ear. "You had to go and pull the dad card, didn't you?"

"If it helps keep us alive, then yes. You need to lock the place

down. You're in charge down there. Can you handle that?"

She didn't hesitate. "Yessir. I've got this."

The line disconnected.

"Engineering, check," he muttered.

It was probably him overreacting, but right about now, he couldn't take the chance. He reached around the back of Hinault's controls and pushed the reset button three times to force a restore, leaning closer to the retinal scanner as he did it. Only the department heads or higher could restore these workstations. While he waited for confirmation of his credentials, the red light flashed on and passed over his eye, leaving a halo of pink painting the room. A moment later, the familiar ding of the rebooting workstation chime echoed through the bridge.

He leaned back and shifted to face the others, the pinkish hue still lingering. "This workstation should be operational in a bit. I'll get you a warfare officer from the second shift." He walked past them toward the forward hatch and leaned out, pulling the steel door closed and spinning the speed wheel to seal it shut. He then turned to meet their waiting gaze. "Adams, you have the bridge."

Her eyes went wide. "Sir! Me?"

"I'm needed in Engineering, and you're the senior officer on this shift. I shouldn't be long. You've got this. You all do." He nodded and started aft, freezing behind them before he went too far. "And don't open that hatch unless it's me, Officer Zucca, or someone uses the pass phrase... *long live the queen*. Is that understood?"

Adams smirked and tilted her head slightly. "Long live the queen, yessir. Should we be worried?"

He swallowed hard. "I'll handle the worrying. You focus on keeping us alive and finding a way out of this mess."

"Aye, sir," they chanted in unison.

He continued aft. He had to talk to a doctor about a pain in his ass.

Rank Does Not Confer Trust



Oscar reached the entrance to Kel's quarters. The hatch was sealed. He reached down and pressed the chime.

"Who is it?" Doc Hansen asked through the speaker.

"It's Oscar. I need a word."

The hatch clicked and whirred. A moment later, it pulled inward. Hansen peered out, glancing left and right, before landing on him. "Everything okay?"

"I don't know yet. But you should seal the aft hatch on my way out. The others on the bridge are busy; they're already short-staffed."

"Really?" She glanced over her shoulder at Kel, who was still lying motionless in her personal quarters. She then returned her attention to him. "You're sealing us in? That can't be good."

He shook his head. "It's a precaution. I'm sure it's nothing."

She tilted her head. "But you're worried?"

"I'm simply covering our bases until we're safe." He wrung his hands behind his back. The less freaked out she was, the better for them and Kel.

She slowly nodded. "Alright. How will I know when to open it?"

He spun in place before starting aft, and she followed in his wake. "Leave that to the team on the bridge. I told them the pass phrase. Only Gianna or I will have it. Is that clear?" He paused at the hatch and turned to face her.

“That sounds like more than covering our bases.”

“Ellen, I need you to keep Kel safe and watch after the others. Best case, I’m overreacting and I’ll be back in a few minutes. Just seal the hatch behind me, okay?”

She swallowed hard. “I noticed you neglected to tell me the worst case.”

“Better not to dwell on it. Now, close and seal this hatch. That’s an order.” He turned and stepped over the threshold.

Doc Hansen’s hand was shaking as she reached out and grasped the handle of the hatch. “Stay safe,” she said, swinging the door closed and latching it. The sound of the speed wheel whirring put his mind at ease.

He leaned forward and jammed the handle downward. It didn’t budge, and the light above the entry flashed red.

“Bridge, check,” he muttered.

As he strode aft, he paused beside the ladder to peer down. A waft of food smells flooded his nostrils and his stomach rumbled. The galley wasn’t far off, but he didn’t have time to eat. Not yet. He needed to get to Engineering first.

He took a step out onto the ladder and worked his way down one rung at a time until he hit the main level and stepped off. Any further down, and he’d be in the bowels of the ship, up to his neck in batteries.

When he glanced left, he caught a glimpse of the next shift of dolphins standing around the galley counter, waiting on their orders. He turned right and continued aft, bypassing the crew bunks. Running into his people with a million questions wasn’t the plan. Getting to Engineering and making sure it was safe was.

Stepping over hatch after hatch, he worked his way around multiple articulating joints, past the secondary air handler, and through the quiet clicks of the switch room, until he arrived in Engineering. The sound of voices inside froze him in his tracks. He paused outside the final hatch and slid with his back against the wall, easing closer to the entrance. Collins was arguing with Klein

about something.

“Stop bothering Cary,” Klein said. “He’s got shit to do, and besides, he’s still paying off his oxygen debt.”

“Give the kid a break, Nuke,” Collins said.

“Do you have business down here, Collins?” The sound of feet stepped closer, moving toward the hatch.

“Hey, I’m not starting anything.” Collins’ voice cracked.

“Then I suggest you let us get back to work. Cary, go help Patel with his pressure dome inspection.”

“Yessir,” Cary said.

A pair of feet receded into the distance toward the aft end of the boat. A second later, Oscar heard another person headed his way. He didn’t want to be caught snooping, so he stepped out of the shadows into the hatch entrance, blocking the exit.

“Hells bells!” Collins jumped backward. “You about gave me a heart attack, Oscar.”

“Whatcha doing down in these parts, Collins?” He tossed a thumb over his shoulder. “I thought you were up front in Weapons.”

“I... was.” Collins ran his hand through his hair. “I just wanted to see if I could help down here. Plus, I had a question for Cary.”

“Oh, yeah. What’s that?”

“What’s what?”

“The question, Collins. What was your question?”

“Oh, nothing.” He waved his hand. “I was curious about the tow cable.”

Klein walked up behind Collins and dipped his head at Oscar. “XO.”

Oscar nodded back. “Bull Nuke.”

A smile cracked at the edges of Klein’s mouth and disappeared.

“Well.” Oscar stepped aside and tilted his head forward. “Why don’t you go make yourself useful somewhere else, Collins?”

“Yessir.” He strode over the threshold and walked past, repeatedly glancing over his shoulder as he went.

It wasn't until he paused at the distant ladder and started upward that Oscar spun around. "What the heck was he doing in here?"

Klein's eyes went wide. "Sir... he was talking to Cary about something."

"You stay here and seal that hatch. I'm going to talk to Cary." He stepped over the threshold past Klein, working his way toward the direction the oxygen thief had gone.

Without questioning him, Klein closed the hatch with a resounding clang and sealed it. He squeezed and relaxed his hand. That was how a dolphin survived. They knew when to question orders, and when not to. At the center was trust and that good-for-nothing hack of a former XO had never tried to gain his. Not after he figured out Oscar was good friends with Kel. Based on how half the crew acted, he swore they only listened to him because of the pins on his uniform. Something Oscar still hadn't worn.

Working his way aft into the bowls of the boat brought him peace. He'd been stressed out up on the bridge. It wasn't his comfort zone. Not like this was. He found his calling nearly thirty years ago down in the heart of a submarine. While he'd failed at many things growing up, keeping a boat like this ticking along hundreds and thousands of meters below the surface felt natural. And for the most part, living with dolphins like Kel and Gianna was easy. Gone was the friction of dealing with traffic, crammed subways, or virtual conference calls.

Down here life was simple, even if death was mere centimeters away. Machines were far more predictable than humans had been to him. He saw the same mannerisms in Klein. It was why they'd clicked so easily. Cary, on the other hand, the vote was still out on him.

"Cary! Where the devil are you?"

He stepped over a generator support and then ascended a few steps alongside the propeller thrust block and bearing. The whine of the machinery spinning up meant only one thing: his people on the

bridge were underway.

As he climbed a short ladder, he came upon Cary and Patel. They were each using a handheld scanner to check for microscopic cracks in the pressure dome. He wasn't sure why, but Klein probably had his reasons.

"Cary!"

The officer in training craned his neck around and flinched forward, face planting against the walls of the pressure dome. "Ouch!" He shook his head from side to side and rubbed his nose with his free hand. "I'm sorry, sir. You freaked me out. I wasn't expecting to see you behind me." The oxygen thief was screaming loud enough to be heard over the propeller.

It was remarkable the noises the sound-dampening material that surrounded the *Bancroft* kept from reaching the outside. The layers of noise-canceling tech helped, too.

Oscar stepped up beside Cary, resting his hand on the young man's shoulder. He then brought his mouth next to his ear, so he didn't have to scream as much. "What was Collins looking for help with?"

Cary drew back and furrowed his brow. "Excuse me, sir?"

"Collins. What did he want? I don't have time to mess around."

His eyes darted around, like he was recalling the conversation word for word. "Nothing... out of... the ordinary, sir. He... asked me about the tow cable... oh, and the geothermal research equipment we've been carrying with us. Something about if we could reuse it to create an antenna to transmit through all this rock."

An antenna. He hadn't asked Collins to research an antenna, and he doubted Adams or Kel had, either. For all he knew, the temperamental bastard was in it with Müller and Hinault. Whatever he was up to, he needed to be in a brig until Kel woke up. He'd need some help in making that happen.

"Thanks." He patted Cary on his shoulder and gave him the thumbs-up. The trainee dolphin eyed him curiously.

He turned and walked away, preferring to stay above the noise of the pump-jet drive below. The engine room was ahead, and he could use some time to think near his favorite machine. He knew every centimeter of this boat, having worked with Kel to design and build the first two prototypes.

When the military approached them about buying their technology outright, he'd been reluctant. He'd always hoped the private sector could do something in the oceans where the governments had failed to. It wasn't until the discovery of a pocket of seven Chinese submarines off the coast of the UK that they changed their mind. Their country's tech had fallen behind the communists and was approaching obsolescence. If he and Kel hadn't sold out to the man, there was no telling where they'd be. The world could be a different place.

He tried to imagine a time when humanity was free to move about below the waves just as freely as they did above them. There was so much in the ocean they hadn't explored. So much room to farm and grow crops. While humans had killed off most of the biological diversity on land, they were still making constant discoveries below the waves. That fact alone had gotten them into this mess in the first place.

Yet one truth remained indisputable: Whatever they'd found down in these trenches was deemed worthy of the ultimate gamble—a world war.

Keys to the Castle



Oscar descended the ladder into the relief from the sub's mechanical heart. The engine room had offered little respite, its brief sanctuary cut short by a barrage of curses echoing down the passage—dashing any lingering hope for a moment's peace.

He glanced around, looking for a pipe or wrench. Klein was too damn tidy. There wasn't a scrap in sight. He'd always preferred a messy shop. It was one of the things that surprised Kel when they started working together in the private sector. He had to remind her how he'd left it to subordinates to keep Engineering neat. Only then did it dawn on her that in all the years they'd known each other, she had never once seen him clean anything.

A messy house was a home well lived in. That was what his mum used to say. She was also convinced that the surest sign of an intelligent person was a mess. He wasn't sure if that was an excuse to never clean or a comment on how she viewed herself and her family.

Failing to find a blunt weapon, he slid along the wall toward the hatch entrance. When he reached the edge, he leaned out and glanced around the frame, snatching a peek into Engineering. All he could see was Klein. He was staring at his display. Oscar leaned further and took in more of the space crowded with half-torn-apart machinery and gadgets. The room was mostly empty.

Klein slammed his fist against the workbench. "Scheisse! Was

zur Hölle is up with this thing?”

“Is everything okay?” Oscar stepped around the corner, taking a few tentative steps until he was confident no one was hiding behind anything.

Klein raised his hands toward the sky. “Geh zum Teufel!”

“Dude, cursing at the machine won’t help. What’s up?”

“I don’t know.” The fresh Bull Nuke shook his head and brought up the dashboard for Engineering. There was a small icon representing each piece of equipment they managed, along with some simple telemetry and health indicators. “An alert just popped up, warning me the tow cable was being engaged. We haven’t touched the thing since our descent down the Trench.”

Oscar leaned forward and checked over the gauge. It was a flat line, and except for a slight blip in the last minute, it was silent. “Can you lock it down?” He reached out and tapped the padlock icon on the right of the entry, and the panel flashed red. That was strange. He’d helped create this software. The only reason that would happen was due to a command error or lockout.

As he studied the rest of the dashboard metrics, a message appeared on the screen warning him of the tow cable activating in the next thirty seconds.

“Right there!” Klein pointed at the dialog box. “I told you. There’s a friggin’ ghost in the machine.”

“There are no ghosts in military hardware.” He nudged Klein aside and grabbed the keyboard. “Only backdoors and redundancies as far as the eye can see.”

He brought up the root command line and ran a few commands that only he and his friends at AAFEUS knew about, and now Klein. A few seconds later, a graphic overlay of the *Bancroft* appeared.

“What’s this?” Klein slid close to his side.

“The ugly underbelly of the military-industrial complex, my boy. Every command issued on board this ship is recorded somewhere in triplicate. From here, we can see everything.”

Oscar brought up the dashboard and tapped a new locator icon

next to the tow cable. It maximized an overlay of the boat, except this time a dot was flashing in the maneuvering room forward of their current position. The tiny space was usually locked down and was only designed to be used if the computer equipment went haywire. And even then, you needed keys that only he and Kel had access to. That didn't prevent someone from using the computers in the room, though.

He found the dialog Klein had opened that was counting down and pressed the button to cancel the cable drop. "Stay here. Don't let Collins deploy that antenna. We'll get tangled in God knows what down here and be even worse off than we already are."

"Aye, sir." Klein grabbed the keyboard and started tapping through the new toy the XO had left open.

Oscar walked five meters aft and leaned into the retinal scanner to unlock his quarters. He hadn't yet moved his bunk up top next to Kel. When the door latch popped, he pushed inward and quickly dropped to his knees. Reaching under his bed, he pulled out a small lockbox.

He flipped it over, entered a code, and then flipped it again, entering a second. He did that four more times on different sides until the lid clicked. It was a secure container of his own design, which not only forced you to enter the correct codes but also only unlocked when you rotated it the right way.

When the lid opened, he reached inside and pulled out his master override key. It was still safe. Without Kel's twin key, this one was useless. His stomach knotted. He wondered if Kel would've told Collins where hers was. If she had, then his could already be at risk. He retrieved a pen from his pocket and tossed it into the box. After he closed the lid, he cleared all the spin locks as he reversed the rotation process. With the lockbox sealed shut, he slid it back under his bed and then slipped the key into his sock. They'd have to take him out if they wanted to get it.

He stood up and stepped out of his room, not wanting to linger longer than necessary. As far as he knew, the clock was ticking. He

pulled the door closed and worked aft toward the tow cable drum and winch deep in the tail of the *Bancroft*.

As he weaved and dodged over the equipment, his heart pounded in his chest. This secret-agent drama crap was for the land lovers. Dolphins played poker, not politics.

Climbing the ladder he'd only minutes ago descended, he half expected to bump into Cary and Patel, but they were nowhere to be found. The towed array cable drum and winch were just on the other side of this hatch. He grasped the latch lever and yanked it clockwise, but to his surprise, it didn't budge. Instead, his hand slipped off, flying right and whacking against the hatch wall.

"Bloody hell!" he screamed, shaking his hand in a fleeting attempt to relieve the pain. The noisy propeller shaft drowned the sounds of his curse. When he looked down, he saw that he'd torn away the skin on his knuckles, and blood was oozing out. The cursed handle was locked tight. Something must have frozen the mechanism shut. Maybe it was the depth.

He spun around, searching for an object to act as a lever. There weren't exactly tool chests sprinkled throughout a submarine. All he had at his disposal was a fire hose. That gave him an idea, though.

The length of hose was wrapped in a spool and attached to the wall near a water spigot. Fighting fires on a boat was no laughing matter. He detached the nozzle end of the hose and yanked it toward the latch handle. Wrapping it around the handle, he pulled it back to a nearby pole. He then made short work of tying two of his best half hitches. His father would be proud.

With one side of the hose tied off, all that remained was the other end and another pulley point. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his trusty utility knife. Its saw-toothed blade should cut through the tubing like butter. Sliding back and forth, his hand was a blur, but making a mark on the hose was harder than he'd anticipated. The lifesaving devices weren't something you wanted wearing out, so they were built to last.

Oscar paused, catching his breath and wiping at his forehead

with his sleeve. This was going to take forever. He could really use some extra hands, not a pulley. He needed to work smarter, not harder. Maybe Cary or Patel were still nearby. They'd been on the port side, scanning for fractures in the pressure dome. If they were following protocol, they would've worked downward and then around toward the starboard side.

He took off in a sprint, leaping onto the ladder and sliding down. He hadn't moved this fast in decades. It was amazing how life and death could motivate a person to new levels.

The sounds of his feet clapping along the metal floor grating were muted by the ever-present hum of the propeller overhead. It was only after years of service that someone mastered the ability to hear lower noises among the background buzz.

As he approached the next hatch transition, he stopped in his tracks. The faint wisps of random noise were either a machine out of calibration or a human attempting to scream above the racket. He assumed the latter and made his way toward the voices starboard of his position.

Coming around the edge of the condenser, he froze and took a step backward. That voice sounded familiar.

"Have you seen Oscar?" Klein asked. "He's the other traitor, and we're looking to take him in. Captain's orders."

His voice had more bass than normal. Not at all how he'd grown to see the man. He'd ordered the Bull Nuke to hold his position at the computer until he returned. Never once had he disobeyed a direct order. If anything, he'd always anticipated them.

"Not in..." Cary paused, seeming to assess the man. "I haven't seen him since—"

"He's lying," someone said, interrupting the oxygen thief. It was a voice Oscar couldn't put his finger on. "He knows where that traitorous git of an XO is. Let's show him who's—"

"Zip it, you muppet." Klein cut the argument short, and a moment later, a dull thump reverberated through the space. It sounded like he'd shoved one of them into the pressure dome. "My

engineer's busy. I asked you down here to find the old geezer, so go do it!"

"Cor," Oscar muttered, his mind reeling. This couldn't be happening. Like Kel had done with Hinault, he'd backed the wrong team from the start. Their situation was worse than he'd realized. Now he had two more assholes to deal with.

His gaze darted around the space, searching and grasping for somewhere, anywhere, to hide. The condenser was at his back, and below the floor grating was a sea of oil tanks, plumbing, and battery cells. Better there than here.

He reached down and yanked on the grating, pulling it upward. After he hopped down on top of a canister, he eased the grating shut, trying hard not to drop it. Klein wasn't a newbie on a submarine. He had a few years of service under his belt.

As he slid down and lowered himself under some cooling pipes, three pairs of feet passed overhead and stopped.

Klein spun around and grabbed the neck of one of the crewman. "You can't be spouting off like that in front of the others. They don't know the captain stripped Collins of his XO title before tossing him in the brig. They're simply following orders. Besides, we can't run this whole blasted place by ourselves. Now, get your head out of your ass and keep your eyes open. He could be anywhere down here."

"Sorry, yessir!" the dolphin said. His friend behind him was nodding.

He recognized the two unfamiliar faces from the galley. They had just joined the crew and were on scut duty, acting as runners throughout the ship, doing whatever anyone needed. Every boat had them, and some even gave them fancy names that made their job out to be more than it was. They were often sailors who passed the dolphin test by the skin of their teeth, and this was their one chance to prove themselves before they were relegated to port duty. If they survived the first tour without wobbling, you knew you could lean on them in the future. Apparently, Collins had been recruiting

a secret crew for a while now.

Lying on the bottom of the boat, staring up at freedom, his situation washed over him. He was screwed port, starboard, and topside. He didn't know which dolphins he could trust, and he'd left the keys to the castle in Klein's hands. While the Bull Nuke couldn't issue commands from that computer terminal he'd left open, he could watch every order being executed live and from where.

His only option now was to shut off Klein's access, or to somehow reach the people he trusted with his life still intact. The problem was, they were at the other end of the boat, and he was paddling upstream with a wooden spoon.

The Smell of Burning Flesh



On black oil. Normally, he'd have wiped his fingers in the shallow pool apart looking for where it had come from, knowing full well it'd probably been there forever or since they'd last done a repair nearby. This time, however, he was using it for another purpose.

He smeared the grease over the bright white parts of his clothes and on his face. While he wasn't a special-ops fighter in the jungle, he couldn't risk being seen in the shadows. He needed to move deliberately down here, being certain to make as little noise as possible. The less he stood out, and the more he blended in with the underbelly of the sub, the more likely he'd survive.

With the oil on as thick as he was willing to put it, he began his slow crawl through the boat. He made his way around and, when feasible, under the pipes. It was no simple task. He had to test them for heat first. There was no sense in getting third-degree burns if he could help it.

As he advanced toward the first of the minuscule hatches on this level, he froze at the sound of the low thunk of footsteps overhead. They also stopped. He couldn't see who they were, but that meant they couldn't see him either.

"I don't know where he is, but we're not gonna find him very fast sticking together," Klein said, screaming over the equipment. "You two stay down here. One of you needs to lift these grates and hop down. I want you checking every nook and cranny."

“Aww, come on,” the first newbie said. “You’re giving us the blasted dirt job.”

“Zip it and do what he says,” the second newbie said. “The captain will take care of us when she comes to. Let’s just do what we’re told and find that traitor.”

These people were brainwashed if they thought Kel would take kindly to them roughing someone up, even if they were following orders. The clang of the hatch opening brought him out of his own headspace. From the sound of the feet, at least two pairs were heading forward. That meant one was staying behind.

He scrambled to hop over the nearby pipes, working his way toward the starboard side. As he lifted his right leg over a steam transfer unit, his thigh brushed against it. He winced in pain and ground his teeth together as his quadriceps locked up. The singed skin reminded him of the first burn he received while doing scut duty on board the HMS *Audacious*. Even back then, his trousers offered little protection. The super-heated pipes were unbearably hot.

With his leg fighting for attention, he ducked behind the turbine condenser and tucked into a ball. The only way they were finding him over here was if they went past the same obstacle. Depending on their degree of belief in Collins, they’d either search high and low or give up after a few minutes and move on.

Time passed, and the longer he sat there, the more tired he got. He’d gone from screaming at his people to threatening their lives. From walking to sprinting, and now sitting still in the course of the last few hours. Taking a second to look back on the past day, he couldn’t help but see failure in his command and, more importantly, his judgment. Minute by minute, the events blended together into a chaos churn of frustration.

His eyelids were growing heavy, and he fought to keep himself awake. But the comfortable warmth of the condenser combined with the hum of his true home was like singing a lullaby to a baby. Oscar’s eyes finally closed, and sleep won out until the familiar

clang and whine of a grate lifting reached across the confined space and slapped him conscious.

His eyes sprang open.

Nothing was going his way today. For some reason, destiny was kicking him repeatedly in the nuts and had decided to deliver him a thorough oxygen thief, as if such a thing weren't fiction.

He craned his head, listening for the telltale signs of someone not used to tight spaces. They were working their way toward him. It was hard to hear with the whine of the propeller and the hissing and gurgling of the condenser, but the sounds were there.

A thunk and scrape of metal against metal.

A bang followed by swear words sailing above the hum of the life-giving machinery.

It wasn't until he'd heard the sizzle and nearby screams accompanied by the clatter of metal hitting the ground that he sprang into action. His window of opportunity was short, but he needed to make the most of it. He lurched forward, catching the oxygen thief off guard while he was staring at his bloody and blistering palm. Seeing he had the upper hand, he launched himself over the superheated pipe and smashed into the dolphin, sending him falling backward.

The body beneath him smacked against the nearby pipes, bending the sailor back in impossible ways. Screams echoed through the chamber, but he didn't relent. Oscar leaned down, grabbing for the metal object he'd heard fall seconds earlier. He thought he felt it until the sailor's unencumbered hand grabbed him, struggling to yank him sideways but failing. Oscar socked him in the stomach with his right hand and then reached for the dolphin's wound. Feeling the slick blood against his hand, he squeezed, bringing forth another blood-curdling wail.

With a scream that loud, he had only a few seconds before someone arrived on the scene. Without a second thought, he bent down, grabbed the wrench the dolphin had been carrying, and raised it in the air. "Sorry," he muttered as he swung it, cracking

him on the side of the head. The dolphin's eyes rolled backward, and his eyelids fell closed.

Not pausing, he tugged on the body and repositioned it near the hot pipe. Once in place, he grasped the unbloodied hand and touched it to the scalding conduit. Two screams required two wounds. He then set the scene by gently placing the man's head against a cooling pipe, with the side he'd smacked resting against it.

As he was positioning the arm, he noticed the lad had an antique blue phone booth tattooed on his bicep. The words *Police Box* were emblazoned along the top. While he'd seen similar booths in London museums, they weren't commonplace anymore and seemed like a random-ass piece of art for a grown man to burn into his flesh forever.

Happy with the scene he'd created, he grabbed the wrench and hopped back over the pipes before working his way toward the open grate. He still hadn't heard any feet, but if he was going to get out of here, there was no better time than the present. Especially with his pursuers down one dolphin.

He pulled himself up and out of the grating, wincing as he put pressure on his leg. With this much pain from barely touching it, he couldn't imagine the anguish that dolphin must have been feeling. When he clutched the wrench, his concerns disintegrated. The man hadn't been lugging around the metal tool for repairs. Oscar could've been on the other end of this thing.

With the grate clear, he eased the hatch open. When Klein and that other monkey passed through, they didn't latch it closed. Their mistake was his gain. After he surveyed the other side, he made a run for it. It was now or never. He barreled straight through the mechanical bowels of Engineering.

Lucky for him, the hatches were open. And like any well-marinated dolphin, hatch hurdles were child's play and second nature. He cleared threshold after threshold without so much as missing a beat.

It wasn't until he hit Engineering that he screeched to a halt.

There, standing in front of the hatch, was Cary. The oxygen thief he'd screamed at countless times in the last few weeks.

He squeezed the wrench. "Step aside, Officer."

Cary swallowed hard. "Is it true? What Klein said about you?"

His eyes narrowed, and the knuckles on his left hand cracked from the pressure. "Use your head, dolphin. Have you ever seen Captain Williams and me at odds? Could you honestly imagine me turning on my country?" He paused, but the oxygen thief didn't budge. "Collins is a traitor to his people. You know it, and I know it. Now, do your family and your country proud, and step aside. I prefer not to hurt you, but I will if you leave me no choice."

Oscar could see the dolphin was battling with two conflicting forces, both claiming to be from his superior officers. He only hoped the logical one prevailed.

Cary raised a shaking hand to his ear and pressed. "Nuke, this is Cary. I think I heard a noise near the aft end of the ship, toward the towline. Should I check it out?" The response came through loud enough for Oscar to hear.

"Stay where you are, you nitwit," Klein said. "Don't leave the hatch unguarded."

"Yessir." Cary tapped his earpiece again, muting his side. He didn't hesitate. He simply turned around and grasped the latch, pulling it gently to unlock it as quietly as he could. With the flip of his wrist, he spun several times and then yanked the door. It opened inward with nary a sound.

Oscar nodded. "Thank you, Officer." He wanted to say more, but time was of the essence. "Stay safe down here. I'll be in touch." And with that, he hopped over the threshold.

The familiar quiet of the forward section of the ship hit him like a wall. Where he was able to mask his movement in the controlled chaos of Engineering, here he needed to move with more grace. Something his mother often reminded him he'd failed to inherit from her.

He flinched as the clang and whirl of the hatch closing behind

him echoed through this quiet segment of the boat. Despite the intrusion of sound, he didn't hear any voices ahead. No one was rushing toward the noise. For now, he'd take this one compartment at a time.

Interlude

The Builders

“**L**osing him killed him right there and then,” Helios muttered, crossing his arms. Willow bit her lip, looking from the portal to the Builder. He’d seen the same thing she had, and yet their interpretations of the event were completely different.

She gestured toward Oscar, peering left and right down the nearby corridors near Engineering. “The lad just saved him from Klein. How is that not honorable? Especially since—”

“Your guardian doesn’t even know what’s happening on this... this,” he waved his hand, “sub-marine. What he did was disobey a direct order from his acting Bull Nuke. In my military, he would be court-martialed on the spot for thinking instead of doing.”

She shook her head and chuckled. “And you wonder why your dimensions loathe you so much. Cary’s bond to Oscar is far deeper than mere orders from his superior. Oscar represents the ideal fusion of brains and brawn, and, akin to Cary, they demonstrate signs of the potential needed for the battle against the—”

“This is a game to you, isn’t it?” Helios shifted on the bench, and his eyes pulsed a deep orangish light. “All of this.” He gestured over the portal, and as his fingertips passed through the virtual display, the surface shimmered and glowed with a faint yellow light, as if he were trying to reach through the space-time gateway.

Willow leaned back in her chair and rested her hands on her knees. “None of this is a game, you egomaniac. I simply approach

things differently than you and the rest of the Builders do.”

He broke out into a belly laugh and tilted his head skyward. “That’s the understatement of the millennium. While you’re off playing touchy-feely with these infernal hu-mans, your kin have moved on to more advanced species, ones capable of actually helping us achieve our goals.”

She fought down a smile and instead watched as Oscar worked his way toward the front of the boat. “That’s the problem with you and your brethren. You’d cut off your nose to spite your face if it meant you’d come out on top. Lest you forget the form of our enemies, straying too far from human-like shape won’t end well.”

Helios grunted and returned his attention to the scene playing out in the portal. “We’ll see,” he muttered. “We’ll see.”

Like a Cat Up a Tree



Here was no one quick work and there was rarely anything to befall. When he stepped into the next section, he slid up beside the secondary air handler. The quiet hiss and hum of the pumps working to push the oxygen through this and the neighboring sections of the *Bancroft* reassured him that all was right in the world—at least all things mechanical. He couldn't say the same for the biologicals.

The distant hatch was closed, so he decided not to chance a walk up the middle of the boat. Instead, he opened a small panel and stepped into the maintenance section of the giant machine. He slid deeper starboard, back behind the air handlers, being careful not to catch his tattered uniform on any equipment.

As he stepped around the floor-to-ceiling tubes full of water and gas, he made his way through a tangle of the desalination and electrolysis units. These were one of three such units on this boat—a trio of luxury by modern dolphin standards. A water electrolysis unit like this allowed the submarine to separate seawater into oxygen and hydrogen. They also built desalination tech into the same unit. The combo provided them the life-giving air to breathe and endless water to drink.

Recent advances in technology had made these units far smaller than they used to be, which had, in turn, allowed multiple levels of redundancy. This unit alone could technically handle the entire

boat, but there was also one in Engineering and a third, much smaller one, just for the bridge.

He never understood how Kel got the expenditure past the budget crunchers who usually nickel-and-dimed every military expense under the sun. Submersibles had gotten by with a single central unit for decades, so the change wasn't insignificant. He'd heard she convinced them to do it to enable deeper and longer patrols and missions like the one they were on. Nobody wanted a sub to have to surface in enemy waters because they lost their ability to create oxygen. That would pretty much paint a bullseye on your boat.

As he came out the far side of the air handler, he paused before he opened the latch. Staring back at the machines, he wondered if he could modify the water electrolysis units to his advantage. Maybe he could knock out the crew by depriving them of oxygen. He'd have to counteract or short-circuit the warning alarms, but it could work. There was, however, the small matter of the innocent lives he'd be putting at risk. From what they'd said earlier in Engineering, even the oxygen thief thought they were following orders—messed-up orders, but orders nonetheless.

Maybe there was something else he could do that didn't require playing Russian roulette with his people. He turned his attention back to the hatch. He'd been so caught up in his own thoughts, he wanted to make sure he hadn't missed any signs of movement or activity before he opened it. There were bound to be dolphins working in, or passing through this segment of the ship. While their crew was half that of a regular nuclear submarine, there was still ample work to do. Someone would come check on this handler at some point.

Just on the other side of the panel was the compartment hatch. With the panel swinging outward, he needed to be careful he wasn't seen. Opposite this segment was the galley and, he hoped, Gianna. She was one of the few people on the boat he could trust unequivocally. The woman not only had a hatred for Collins, she'd

flirted with Oscar for years. What he didn't know was if Collins' cronies had already taken her out.

He reached forward and gently squeezed the lever to release the latch from the inside. The faint but crisp click echoed through the corridor. He knew it was louder in the machine, but he couldn't help but catch his breath and freeze. Maybe if someone heard it, he'd hear them coming.

Seconds ticked by, but no one came. When he was happy he hadn't made too much noise, he eased the panel outward and slipped back into the through space. During the transition, he ducked down so, if someone was in the galley, they wouldn't be able to see him through the small porthole. If they did, any hope he had of making it to the bridge would evaporate in an instant.

He slid down along the steel panel he'd exited from and eased up to the hatch. Carefully, he peered through the porthole, making sure he only used one eye. He scanned the galley. It was small by restaurant standards, but the space was often the pulse of the boat. If it wasn't packed to the gills with laughter, smiling faces, and eating, it was empty because everyone was working or sleeping. What was strange was that it was mostly empty at an hour when it should be buzzing with activity.

There should've been at least a dozen people dining and preparing for an upcoming shift rotation, but he only saw a handful of dolphins, one of which was Gianna. She was manning the fryers, being careful not to burn herself or cause a fire. The fried fixings from the galley were the most popular fare on a boat like this. If you were forced into months of isolation without friends or family, then you better damn well have good food.

As he panned around the room, he counted five others. Two of them were sitting at a table near Gianna and were facing sideways to him. The other three were waiting for their orders and had their backs to the hatch. There weren't so many that he couldn't handle himself with Gianna's help, but not knowing their allegiance gave him pause.

Oscar recognized several of the people from his interrogation earlier that morning. Two of them were oxygen thieves and had practically shat themselves during questioning. The third was Marín's right-hand man from Weapons. He had to assume the dolphin newbies were as dumb as the muscle from Engineering. While they'd passed basic training, they hadn't yet figured out how the chain of command worked on a boat. They could easily be on Collins' side.

When he turned his attention to the other two, he caught some commotion from Gianna out of the corner of his eye. She was waving her hands at the fryer. From the looks of it, she'd tossed something in and made a mess with the grease. In all her years of cooking, he'd never seen her make a mistake, let alone with a fryer. It was the riskiest appliance on board the boat. She was either flustered, or her mind was elsewhere.

He studied her body language and motions, but something about them was strange. They seemed random, not at all fluid or focused on the task at hand. It wasn't until he caught her gaze that he realized she was staring at him. Not in his general direction but straight at him. Her eyes widened a bit. When she caught her mistake, she casually diverted her focus and shook her head from side to side. She knew the situation better than he did, and if she thought he shouldn't come in, then he wouldn't.

While his mind leapt through his options, he spotted one of the officers with their back to him shift their stance. He must have seen Gianna's facial gestures and turned to see what she was looking at.

Oscar ducked down just in time and, without thinking, grabbed the panel to his side and dove through it, pulling it closed with a click behind him. He then took four giant leaps and rounded the corner before scanning the area, trying to figure out what to do next.

There weren't many hiding spaces. Rows of cylinders lined the space, each filled with liquid in different stages of desalination or electrolysis. He could squeeze between them, but anyone coming

back to look would see him in an instant. He could also try to climb on top of the machinery, but it was super tight and not somewhere he could hide long. Besides, he'd be cornered like a cat up a tree.

His only option was the same as earlier: down in the sub-level. He bent over, lifted the grating in front of him, and climbed down, wincing as he did. His right leg was still throbbing from the burn. With all the adrenaline flowing, he hadn't given it much thought. If he didn't take care of it soon, it might get infected, especially with all the germs in this place. The grease he slathered on didn't help either.

He shoved the concern to the back of his mind and slid down into the floor cavity, slowly lowering the grating as he went. The space below the water canisters was far more precarious than below deck in Engineering. Not because of the potential for burns but because of the sheer number of pipes and wires crisscrossing the sub-level. It was a precisely engineered minefield.

As he slithered his way sternward to get out of the line of sight from above, the sound of the hatch opening echoed through the space. He froze. His heart raced as if he'd just sprinted up a dozen flights of stairs.

"I thought I saw her eyeing someone in here," a female voice said, stepping into the corridor. It sounded like Negal, their supply officer in training.

Another set of feet entered behind him. "Collins said the Bull Nuke was in Engineering, though. Who'd be daft enough to hide here? You sure the old cook isn't seeing things? She did almost stick her hand in that fryer, for crying out loud."

The second voice sounded like one of the male oxygen thieves he'd seen doing scut work between supply and weapons. He hadn't thought to check the auxiliary teams in that compartment when he was searching for Hinault's accomplice earlier. With four traitors on board, there were bound to be more.

"I'm not taking any chances," Negal began. "Until Collins can get into the bridge and take over this boat, we're taking every

precaution. I need you to go around the back of this starboard water unit. I'll check the port side. Let's see if we have any rats in the pipes."

"Damnit," Oscar mouthed.

His clock was ticking, and he only had a few seconds to make himself scarce. He rested his foot against the lower segment of one of the electrolysis tanks and pushed off, sliding on his back half a meter. He slid under a low wiring harness. It was a good thing he hadn't worn his utility belt today, or he'd have scraped the ground and given himself away.

While he couldn't reach the complete darkness that lay further starboard, he crab-crawled as far as he could until the panel clicked open. He then tucked his feet under a dense wire harness and forced his body as low as he could around a hydrogen storage containment unit. It wasn't exactly someplace he wanted a spark to go off, but if a dolphin was planning to shoot him out of this hole, they weren't the brightest bulb in the bunch.

He wrapped his face in his arms and lay perfectly still. The only thing he could see was the shadow of someone moving overhead. Otherwise, the storage unit blocked his view. He would have preferred to see his hunter circling above. But, given the circumstances, he didn't want to risk the whites of his eyes or anything he'd missed smudging with the oil giving him away.

Step by step, the feet worked their way starboard until they paused at the same point he had. When they didn't move for a few seconds, he thought they might have heard the beat of his heart. To him, it sounded like a bass drum pounding against the walls of the hydrogen container. He knew it was his imagination, but that didn't convince his nerves.

Only when the oxygen thief continued forward did he breathe again. They weren't lifting the access hatch. That was good. Really good. Ideally, they'd keep heading aft and not check below.

He counted off their strides: one, two, three steps. That was one meter. They kept going another five meters before stopping. He

craned his neck backward. They were well past his position, and he couldn't see their shadow anymore. He might be able to make it further into the dark corners of the sub-floor before they turned around.

Staying put or going deeper for cover, it felt like a repeat of what happened at the mouth of the cave system. The *Bancroft* went deep and hid, but now they were cornered in the cavern with no way out. While he understood this situation was different, the last thing he wanted was to make the same mistake twice. Taking out the dolphin in training might be possible, but they could scream for help before he did. Plus, Negal was a black belt. She'd kick his ass if she got close enough.

"Blast it," he muttered under his breath as he carefully uncurled and started to crab-crawl starboard past a few more hydrogen canisters. After he'd moved another three meters, he froze as the screech of the floor grate being lifted echoed through the otherwise silent compartment. He turned right and scrambled into the safety of the darkness that moments earlier had been out of reach.

Just as he lowered his knees, the familiar click of a torch brought him to a stop. Oscar did his best to ignore it and tucked into a ball, trying to keep his body behind the silhouette of the hydrogen canisters. He froze when the beam of light passed over his head. It paused for a second when it reached the forward end of the ship, and then slowly made its way lower, working back through the equipment. Only after he'd counted to ten did he dare take a breath.

At this rate, he wasn't going to make it through another hour without either having a heart attack or being discovered. Maybe he was better off confronting them. Certainly, they couldn't all be brainwashed. The Naval Academy must've had a bad batch of graduates or instructors.

That was it. He should talk to them. It made more sense than this.

"Why haven't they flushed him out yet?" Collins stormed

through the open hatch, stomping his way aftward toward Engineering. “First person to bash his brains in gets a week of extra shore leave when we return to port.”

“Hell to the yeah!” the nearby oxygen thief screamed. “You hear that shit, Negal? I’m gonna get me a new honey next time we hit the dock.” He slammed the grate down and sprinted aft, working his way as quickly as possible out of the water unit.

Like the other traitors on the ship, he was following Collins into Engineering. The sound of feet thumping aftward, along with the hoots and hollering of a lynching, sent shivers up his spine. Perhaps now wasn’t the time to reach out an olive branch.

He lifted his head and peeked over the top of the canister to see if he could find Negal.

“Wait up!” she called out. Her silhouette was faint and only barely visible on the other side of the sub-level. She crawled a few meters before standing up and lifting herself out of the lower level. Somehow, she’d raised her grating, and he hadn’t even heard her.

Another few minutes and they could have been face-to-face. He cringed at the thought. He’d seen her take out a cocky recruit in a wrestling match once. Shattered the poor fellow’s nose in the blink of an eye.

As he sat up, one thing was immediately obvious. Collins had done him a favor clearing the way, and if he had any chance of getting to the bridge, it was now.

He scrambled onto his knees and crawled as fast as his haggard body could carry him toward the nearest hatch. While his right leg was screaming the entire time, he wasn’t listening. The rally cry of hope was all his ears were hearing.

Gunny Sacks



O slipping on the moist metal and pushed up the "Shit," he felt the hatch collapsing with a thunk onto the grating.

He shook his wrist from side to side in a failed attempt to fling the growing pain away. Somehow, he must have wiped his face and gotten grease on his palm. When he stared down, crimson droplets passed between the floor grating and were pooling on the ground below.

The room suddenly started spinning. He didn't handle the sight of blood very well, least of all his own. When he was little, his mum used to tease him, saying he'd never be a doctor because he passed out every time he got a shot. It was something he'd warned Doc Hansen about when they first met for his physical. She'd vowed to keep his secret.

"No, no, no," he shook his head, willing himself to stay conscious. This wasn't happening. He turned over his hand, searching for the cut until he found it. It was along the bottom edge of his palm by his pinky, and it was so deep he swore he could see the bone.

There wasn't much he could do right now other than apply pressure, so he held his palm face up with his arm against his stomach and pushed up with his other hand. Once he scrambled over the edge, he reached out and carefully lowered the hatch with as little noise as possible. There was no point in broadcasting his

location any more than he already had.

Turning to work his way toward the panel, he froze as the sound of rapid footsteps approached from the galley. They'd heard him lumbering out of the hole. They had to have. As he turned to run aft, the pairs of feet skittered past.

"We're late, dude," a voice said, trailing into the distance. "Can you believe it? They found Daven's body. He cracked his head open and fucked up both hands. Collins reckons it was Allen, but I'm not so sure..." The voices trailed off into a whisper as they passed deeper into the boat.

If they'd already discovered the body, they were making quick work of Engineering. It was only a matter of time before they broadened the search to the rest of the boat. Depending on how many people they'd rounded up, if he had ten minutes before they finished searching that end, he'd be lucky.

He tiptoed up to the panel and leaned closer, putting his ear against it. All he could hear was the hum of the electrolysis and the bubbling of water through the nearby pipes. It was now or never.

Using his right hand, he clicked the latch handle and gave it a gentle nudge outward, cracking it open to peek aftward. There was no one visible the entire length, all the way to Engineering. For once, he was happy they didn't put a porthole on every inner hatch.

He pushed the door open wide enough to flip awkwardly around and peer into the galley. His gaze fell upon Gianna, and his stomach tightened. For a split second, he feared he'd made a grave mistake. But catching sight of her biting her lower lip, the way she did when she was nervous, brought a reassuring smile to his face.

Her hands were on her hips, and she was shaking her head. "About time you popped up. Were you waiting for an engraved invitation? I was wondering if I'd seen a ghost. Get your butt in here and let's lock up."

Oscar stumbled out of the panel and swung around to click the latch closed when things went sideways.

"There he is!" Klein shouted. "He's entering the galley."

As he turned to look at Klein, he felt someone grab the back of his shirt and yank him through the open hatch. He tumbled backward, and while he didn't crack his head, he fell hard on his tailbone. The momentum from the fall tore his wounded hand free from his chest, swinging it around and smacking it against the floor.

"Argh!" He rolled onto his stomach and gritted his teeth as waves of pain coursed through his hand and up his arm. He hadn't suffered this much since shattering his ankle as a kid.

After the worst of the discomfort subsided, his eyes sprung open to survey who'd snatched him. All he saw was Gianna slamming the hatch closed and spinning the speed wheel to the lock position.

"I ain't got time to engrave a bloody invite. Besides, I told you to get in here." Gianna stepped over him, being careful of his outstretched hand. "Now get your old bones up and grab a knapsack."

He rolled sideways onto his good elbow and did his best gymnastics tumbling routine to stand up. It didn't go well. He crashed into a nearby table with his shoulder. Lucky for him, it was bolted to the floor, so all he did was fall into it. He winced as he rotated his core, testing his mobility. Between his right knee being burned, his shoulder throbbing, and the gash on his left hand, he was a broken man. But he was alive.

Once he was upright, he gathered his wits and searched for where she'd disappeared to. Gianna ducked down behind the counter and came back up, lugging a few gunny sacks.

He squinted at the burlap packs. "What are these for?"

She tossed one at him, and it slammed into his chest, sending him careening flat on his backside on the tabletop behind him. "Sorry, I forgot about the hand."

"No... worries." He pushed up and off the table, wincing.

Gianna stepped out from behind the counter lugging two of the sacks. "They're topped off with grub. If we're gonna camp out on the bridge, I figured we'd need some food." She paused in front of him and squinted. "Please tell me you know how to get in?"

The pounding on the aft hatch interrupted his answer. When he turned to see who it was, Klein was staring back. Standing behind him was Collins. The look on the man's face could melt lead. Or it would have if there weren't a few inches of carbon nano-reinforced steel between him and the former XO.

He watched as Collins screamed something over his shoulder. Oscar didn't need to see his mouth to know what he said. He was ordering his people to go up a level and cut them off before he and Gianna got to the bridge.

When he turned to tell her to get moving, it took him a second to realize she was already gone. That woman waited for no one, let alone a man. She had fire in her step. He liked that.

As he sprinted across the galley, he caught sight of her feet ascending the ladder toward the bridge hatch. Scaling this contraption was going to be sheer agony, but pain was a small concession to pay to avoid death.

At the bottom of the ladder, he took a deep breath and started upward. He held the gunny sack in his right hand while he grasped the rung above his head. After that, he stepped up and reached high with his left hand. Before he closed it around the rung, he paused for another breath. The blood was streaking down his arm, staining his already disgusting shirt an awful shade of blood-red blue.

Squeezing his hand around the metal rung, he winced and pushed up with his feet, repeating the motion with his right and then left. Each time, the pain reminded him of what he was working for. His life and the life of his friends were more valuable than the trash on the other side of that hatch.

He ground his teeth together as he took each rung one at a time. The entire way, he couldn't see how this would end. He'd lost the ability to imagine his way out of a situation. In all the years he'd been alive, and ever since he was a kid, he could always see his future. Be it minutes or hours ahead, he could visualize what they were going to eat for dinner. Or at the academy, he could plan out his entire semester of studies. Never once had he not been able to

envision something until now. For the first time, he couldn't see a path forward.

"Come on, come on," Gianna said, shocking him out of yet another stupor. She was standing at the top of the ladder, only a few steps from the hatch into the bridge.

As his head peaked up into the next level, she whacked the door several times with the hilt of a butcher knife. She must have grabbed it before they left. The sound of the drumming echoed aftward, alerting Collins' people who were working their way toward them. She should have moved further aft and closed the nearest hatch, but it was too late now.

"Just push the buzzer," he said as he tossed the gunny sack over the edge before pulling himself up.

"Crap, I forgot." Gianna pressed the button beside the hatch to hail the people on the other side.

With the sack out of his hand, he made short work of the remaining rungs. He'd probably need to talk to the doc about some pain pills once he was inside. That, or maybe she could just knock him out until they got out of this mess.

"Who is it?" Adams asked.

The voice of the CIS was music to his ears. For some reason, he hadn't been able to visualize her anymore. Perhaps he'd lost more blood than he imagined.

"It's goddamned dinner. Now let us in!" Gianna said.

Adams cleared her throat. "That's not the passphrase, Chef."

"Are you serious?" she asked.

He shook his head and nudged her out of the way, pushing his thumb against the button. It wouldn't just hail the other side, it would identify him to Adams. "Long live the queen," he whispered into the microphone.

"Freeze!" a voice shouted from down the corridor.

"Don't tell them to freeze, you idiot," Klein said. "Shoot 'em!"

Oscar ducked down and grabbed the gunny sack, bringing it up between himself and the distant dolphins. The whirl of the speed

wheel and the latch clanging open behind him brought tears to his eyes. They were going to make it.

When the hatch swung outward, the bullets started flying. The crack of the firing pin igniting the deadly projectiles heightened his already frazzled senses.

“Get in, get in!” He brought his left hand around and this time pushed against Gianna. She, too, was holding up her sacks, using them as a makeshift shield.

The bang and thud of multiple shots colliding against his sack nudged him backward as he stepped over the threshold. Once he was further inside, he reached out with his bloody hand and grasped the hatch handle, pulling with everything he had. The door swung toward him, and at the same time, one of the rubber bullets smacked into his exposed forearm.

Where the pain from the cut came in sharp bolts, they quickly crested and switched into throbbing waves. This pain, however, was like shoving his finger into an electric socket. The lightning bolt sent him reeling back against Gianna, causing both of them to crash down to the ground.

Had Adams not been standing to the side of the hatch, they would’ve swarmed the bridge in seconds, but her quick thinking led her to step aside to get cover. While he was busy flopping around in pain, she was there to slam the latch closed. The speed wheel whirred shut with a guttural ferocity, like an animal fighting for its life. Because they were.

The sound of rubber bullets ricocheting off the hatch was followed seconds later by several loud thuds. The idiots must have been hitting the hatch with a sledgehammer or something solid with a lot of mass. Dull banging noises formed the backdrop drumbeat to the screams ripping his throat to shreds.

Lotion



“**A** grasping at his left arm! His bellows of pain were incomprehensible to the dolphins circling over him, but to him, they were cries for help. Except they weren’t helping; they were merely watching.

“What should we do?” Adams screeched.

Gianna scrambled up off the ground and slid beside him. “Someone grab a med kit. Larsson, get your butt down here and hold him.”

He watched as the coxswain dropped to his knees on his other side, but the pain was too much. Keeping his body still was like asking a horny teenage boy in a room full of Playboy bunnies not to get a hard on. It wasn’t happening.

Oscar swung his leg around, barreling over Larsson and rounding on Gianna. She, however, wasn’t having any of his nonsense. The Italian chef laid on top of him and grabbed his arm, pushing it out to his side with all her might. At any other time, feeling her breasts against his chest would have been a turn-on. But at the moment, all he could think about was how impossibly strong the woman was.

It was like a metal vise was squeezing his arm. No matter what he did to relieve the pain, it wouldn’t move. She’d also somehow immobilized his legs. Or maybe someone was lying on them. He couldn’t tell.

Masters screeched. “Why’s there so much blood? I thought we

used rubber bullets.”

Gianna groaned, struggling to keep her balance with her knee pinning his good hand against the floor. “It’s... not from the bullet. He cut his hand escaping below deck.” She winced when she rotated his bad hand over. “I hadn’t realized it was this bad.”

He screamed. It felt like she was scraping her nails down his arm and stabbing his hand with a dagger. He had to get loose.

“Hold him!” Doc Hansen stormed into the vestibule.

He hadn’t heard her voice in hours, but if there was one person he wanted to hear right now, it was her. “Pain! Please! Stop—the—pain!”

A sharp pinch nipped at his bicep, and the room suddenly went soft. She must have hit him up with a narcotic of some kind. Whatever it was, it was nice. Everything slowed down, and his agony receded into the background like a fog rolling in.

Almost instantly, Gianna released her pressure. Or was she floating off him? He couldn’t tell for sure.

When he turned his head to look at the doc’s face, her mouth was moving, but the words weren’t in sync. “...can’t knock him out... XO... Captain... incapacitated... chain of command... Collins.”

It was like he was watching an old-school cinema, and the word track was out of sync with the video. Except this was different. No matter how hard he focused, he couldn’t make out the complete conversation.

Time seemed to jump from that point forward. When he glanced to the left, he realized his arm was bandaged. Some angel appeared to have stitched up his hand and put the whole thing in a gangly-ass splint.

The skin on his forearm looked like a deep purple well of ink had spilled over a sea of his chocolate brown skin. He’d received compliments about his skin from women for years. For some reason, they were surprised how baby-soft and smooth it was for a Black man. He’d thanked his mum thousands of times for her homemade

lotion recipe. The shea butter, carrot seed oil, and lavender were an unbeatable trio for skincare.

Oscar didn't know why lotions had popped into his mind. His mother hadn't been in his thoughts for years. Not since she'd selfishly taken her own life, leaving him alone in the world. She fell apart when his father died. He, too, had committed suicide, except he did it after being forced out of the military. He'd given his country a lifetime of service and couldn't handle not being in command of a boat. While he'd sailed the surface of the ocean, the act had protected both the UK and his own sanity. Losing it meant losing his purpose. As the cornerstone of their family, when he crumbled, the others followed.

He curled up in a ball, wishing his parents were still alive. Part of him always imagined he'd help them through their golden years. They could come live in his house, and he'd see them when he returned to port. Before he knew it, the images were too much. He broke down in tears, and not just a few drops slipping down his face. A sniveling pool of salty water.

When someone gently lifted his head off the ground and set it on their lap, he snapped out of his emotional spiral.

"It's okay," Gianna whispered. "Your mum passed a long time ago. It wasn't your fault."

He cleared his throat. "I should have been there for her."

"We all have our emotional anchors pulling us down. For me, it tends to be my brother." She rubbed her hand through his salt-and-pepper hair, brushing at the longer strands on top. "The tart's impossible to connect with. He never showed any interest in me or my life. Even when he was fighting to survive in the hospital, he just didn't let anyone in. He was a self-centered twat."

She'd never mentioned her brother to him before. Come to think of it, except for her kids and her ex, she'd never mentioned any other family. Maybe she'd finally lowered her shields. The brink of death often did that to even the strongest people.

"How long have I been..." he gestured in the air with his good

hand.

“Only a few hours.” Gianna picked up a damp cloth and rubbed at his face. “Did you really need to wipe oil all over yourself? Couldn’t you have used dirt? This stuff is impossible to get off.”

He chuckled. “Give it a few years. I’m sure then we’ll have more grime below deck I could use.”

“You gonna moan all day, or are we gonna figure out how to get out of this mess?” Doc Hansen stepped into the small space in front of the hatch, bent down on one knee, and slid a blood pressure cuff onto his good arm. “Sorry we didn’t move you. We’re kinda overflowing with patients right now. Hinault’s still in a coma, and Müller—well, I got tired of listening to her mouth after you had her brought up here, so I’ve been keeping her knocked out.”

She pressed the button to pump up the cuff and stared at the readout. The once-simple machine had received an update years ago. Nowadays, it contained sensors for blood pressure, heart rate, stress, blood oxygen, and more.

“As usual, Mr. Allen, you’re as healthy as an ox.” She undid the cuff and stood up. “Come on now. Enough lounging around on the job. We’ve got pressing matters to deal with.”

There was one thing he’d learned a long time ago: if Gianna or Ellen said move, you moved. He slowly rolled off Gianna’s lap onto his good side and then pushed up onto his knee. “Ouch.” He reached down and rubbed at the bandage on his leg.

Doc Hansen offered her hand. “It was getting infected, and I did as much as I could. I can get you some more painkillers, but you’re gonna have to push past that one, boss.”

Oscar took her hand in his and pulled, groaning as he stood up straight. “Ugh. I’ll manage. Thanks for patching me up, Doc. Hopefully, the team’s kept us safe in here.”

He didn’t wait for her reply. Instead, he turned and limped forward, making his way toward the bridge. When he passed Kel’s door, he paused momentarily, realizing he needed to talk to the others first.

“Alright, what’s our status?” he asked, announcing his arrival behind his ragtag team.

“XO on the deck,” Adams said, being sure to keep her attention on her controls.

“Welcome back, sir!” Larsson smiled. “We were wondering if Doc was gonna make us open the hatch.”

He spun around to face Doc Hansen.

She met him with a raised hand. “Don’t even start with me. You know how regulations work. The chain of command on a boat is clear. If you’re incapacitated or unconscious for more than four hours, command of the vessel turns over to the next officer in line. That, or if an event occurs that requires the approval of a superior officer—like firing a torpedo or...”

He waved her quiet. “I know the damn regs. I taught the bloody courses a few years back. You weren’t about to hand the *Bancroft* over to that traitor, were you?”

Her face went blank. He couldn’t tell if she was offended, or if she was simply thinking. “I... don’t know. And fortunately for us, we didn’t have to find out.”

Now was neither the time nor the place to push her on that. He returned his attention to the waiting gaze of the others. “Update, please.”

“Yessir.” Adams flipped around and gestured at the screen above her head.

On it was the cave system she’d mapped out earlier. It highlighted their path downward and into their first hiding spot. It also detailed their movement since. From the looks of it, they’d made their way to their target position and had been there for a while now. What he didn’t recognize was the rest of the map. It was massive and expanded out in all directions for kilometers.

“What am I looking at?”

Masters cleared her throat. “You told us to find a way out of this shitstorm. So... well, we took that literally, sir. We’ve been hunting for a way out.”

He reached forward and panned around the map they'd created. It reminded him of a video game—a chaotic mess of a game at that. The tunnels went on for what seemed like forever. “Did you find it? A way out?”

“Not exactly.” Masters adjusted the display overhead and brought up a section of the map about a kilometer up, toward the walls of the Trench.

When he leaned forward, he tilted his head. He wasn't sure what he was seeing.

Adams answered before he asked. “It's a small hole, sir. About a hundred meters long. While it's not big enough for us to pilot the *Bancroft* through, we should be able to get a minnow out.”

He straightened up. This could change everything. They might be able to reach AAFEUS Command. “Did you do it?”

“No, sir,” Masters began. “We didn't want to risk losing a minnow. Not yet. Not until we tried to retrieve the ones above. There's also the small matter of the USS *Walrus* and the *Oarfish*.”

He'd forgotten all about their traitorous friends. From the details on the map, they'd gotten as far as they could without him. “What about the rest of the boat?”

Masters swallowed hard, and her gaze returned to Adams.

“They've taken Engineering, sir.” Adams spun in her chair to face him. “We can move, but only at about ten percent capacity. I don't know what—”

“They can't cut the line,” Oscar interrupted. “Not only would they lose the upper hand, that would engage the secondary emergency connection from the bridge, and that's in another physical layer closer to the hull and bloody painful to reach.” He reached up and tapped the overhead screen, studying the readings. “From the looks of it, they dampened the reactor power to the pump-jets. It's ingenious.”

“Ingenious?” Gianna whacked him on the shoulder. “Are you goddamn kidding me? Now's not the time to complement the idiots below deck.”

Oscar spun around. "Stand down, Officer Zucca! Those are our people down there. They're being led by a traitor, but they're still our crew mates. They think Collins is in charge, and that's on me. I should have accepted the XO position more openly before everything went pear shaped. Maybe then we wouldn't be in this mess in the first place."

"But—" Gianna began.

"Gianna, come on." He raised his hands.

She shook her head and tossed her thumb aft. "When you were mumbling back there, you said that Klein and Cary knew, and those twats still took Collins' side. Doesn't that say something?"

He flexed his right hand into a fist, thinking about Klein. "It tells me that one of the two of them has poor judgement."

"What does that mean?" Doc Hansen asked.

The memories of smashing the oxygen thief on the side of the head with the wrench and burning his hand flashed through his mind. If Cary hadn't let him out, he'd have been dead for sure. "Let's just say I wouldn't be here if Cary hadn't helped me escape."

Adams' eyes went wide. "Where is he?"

He tilted his head and shrugged. "Last I saw him, he was sealing up Engineering while I was escaping. Unless he turned himself in, he should still be there."

"Well, that's good." Adams turned and tweaked her controls. "Yes! He's right there." She pointed at the camera view from Engineering on her screen. "We can talk directly to him. All I need to do—"

"No!" Oscar lurched across the space between them and pulled her hand away from her control panel. "Don't connect to him. Klein is watching everything we do up here."

She shook her head. "How's that possible?"

"Because your lax XO left a console open down there with a root level observation mode turned on. He tricked me into it when we were trying to track down Collins. I don't think he's just on Collins' side. I think he was in cahoots with Müller and Hinault. Frankly,

Collins could be in on it too.”

“I don’t see how that’s possible,” Gianna said. “That man practically bleeds tea and crumpets. Did you know he started breeding corgis after he joined the military? Just like Queen Elizabeth II used to do. His wife ended up taking them in the divorce, but he still used to help her out with them when he had shore leave.”

He chuckled at the thought of Collins dealing with a kennel full of yipping corgis. The stubborn but smart breed must have been a pain in his ass.

“Either way,” he began, “we have good people down there. So, let’s put our heads together and figure out our next step. I think we should reach out to the Americans, see who’s alive. Maybe then we can retrieve our minnows up in that cave and launch one out of that hole.” He glanced around. “Anyone have any other ideas?”

The bridge fell silent. It wasn’t the pool of creativity he was hoping for, but at least they had something to work with.

“Alright.” He turned his attention to Adams. “Let’s get on the horn with Weapons and see if we can cobble together a weak-ass submersible. Ideally, not another minnow. We’re gonna send it up to have a chat with the Yankees.”

Breaking Point



Their plan was, ideally, to get to the point of perfection they had, but they couldn't afford.

Oscar brought his left hand up to his face and accidentally whacked himself with the splint. That was the third time in the last hour he'd done that. One more, and he was gonna rip the stupid thing off.

"How much further?" he asked.

They knew he could read the display himself, but they still answered him anyhow. In stressful moments like this, he hated silence more than anything.

"We should be in transit range in two minutes, sir," Masters said. She was piloting the minnow in a roundabout route toward the central shaft they'd descended.

Rather than give away their position, they decided to use the remains of their tether to get them as far as possible. After that, they navigated the minnow untethered, knowing full well the transmission side could be detected. That was why the tether itself was designed to act as a broadcast relay. This allowed them to route the minnow out of their tunnel and into another one before bringing it up. If someone attempted to find the transmitting location, they'd come up empty-handed. The most they could do was follow the fiber cable back to the source. By then, the *Bancroft* would have relocated to a safer vantage.

As the minnow poked out of the impossibly small cave, it opened up into the massive shaft they had descended earlier. The sheer scale of the cavern was staggering. It was hard to imagine these tunnels had existed all these years without detection.

“While we’re waiting,” he began, “dare I ask if we’ve found any biomass down here while I was out?”

Larsson glanced up from his controls, locking eyes with Adams. She was doing her best not to react, but her stiffened posture gave her away.

He rapped his knuckles on the back of her chair. “Come on. Spit it out.”

“We were hoping to keep it under wraps, sir.” Adams shifted in her seat and looked at him. “Until the captain woke up. We knew how much it meant to her.”

“I know what you mean, but if we have a bargaining chip in our pocket, I’d like to know.”

Adams nodded. “Of course.” She tapped out a few commands on her control panel, and a collage of images appeared on the secondary display to his right.

When he peered over at it, he gasped. The scene before him was a surreal landscape, like something straight out of a sci-fi film. There was a rainbow of colors as far as the eye could see: purple stalks, green leafy fronds that resembled seaweed, red tubulars, and orange blades, to name a few. He’d seen pictures of coral reefs and undersea beds filled with theoretical life like this from the history books, but this was on another level.

“Our sentiment exactly,” Adams said. “Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Stunning,” he muttered. The cornucopia of life laid out before them in these lightless caves was astounding. He stared slack-jawed at the video Adams was playing. It had been recorded earlier when the *Bancroft* passed through another cavern. In the first minute, he counted twenty different aquatic species he’d never seen before, and from the looks of it, the recording was quite long.

“We’re within broadcast range of the Americans,” Masters said,

interrupting his trance. “They appear to be stationary near the edge of the hole we descended through. I can’t tell if it’s the *Walrus* of the *Oarfish*, sir.”

Colorful new underwater life forms weren’t the solution to their tangled mess. For that, they needed a diplomatic hand.

Oscar adjusted his shirt, but it felt like trying to shine a rusty coin. Nothing short of a shower would salvage his appearance. “Open a blue laser link from the minnow to the Americans. Maximum encryption. AAFEUS communication protocols.”

“Aye, sir.” Adams pulled up her CIS controls, pushing aside the ones used by Hinault to coordinate with the Warfare team below deck. She was still performing double duty.

That reminded him he’d forgotten to rustle up someone from the second shift to help out. It was probably for the best. The last thing they needed was another unknown in their midst. At least he knew he could trust the remaining people on the bridge and in Weapons.

Adams raised her finger up and pointed it toward him to let him know the feed was live.

He stiffened and lifted his chin, hoping his stoic gaze would lessen the impact of his visible bandages. “This is XO Oscar Allen of the HMS *Bancroft* hailing the American Virginia-class submarine. Please acknowledge.”

There was only silence. He waited a few moments to give them a chance to reply before repeating himself.

“This is XO Oscar Allen of the HMS *Bancroft* hailing—”

“This is CO Joel Friedrich of the USS *Walrus*.” His image appeared a moment later after his audio. “It’s good to hear your voice, Oscar. We were beginning to wonder if you’d survived the Hunter seeker.”

A wave of relief washed over him. He wasn’t sure how he would’ve handled the situation if Snyder from the *Oarfish* had replied. “I can’t take credit for that. CO Williams and her team were the ones who outsmarted your drone.”

“I’d expect nothing less. How is Kel?”

He bit his lower lip.

“What happened?” Joel moved closer to the camera.

Oscar reached up and rubbed at the scruff on his face. “We’ve been dealt a tough hand with the traitors on board.”

“Plural?” Joel raised his eyebrows.

“Four, last we counted, but there could be more.”

Joel ran his fingers through his perfectly cropped hair. “Shit... and Kel... is she?”

He swallowed hard. “She’s alive. Down for the count, but breathing. She’s a tough cookie.”

“Don’t I know it.”

Oscar chuckled. He’d heard plenty about how Kel had stuck it to the prick during their divorce. If anyone other than him knew how tough she was, it was her ex-husband. “What’s the status up there? What became of the *Oarfish*?”

Joel stared off-screen before reaching up to mute his end. The camera was still broadcasting, though. He appeared to be having a discussion with someone.

As Oscar watched, the conversation grew more heated. He was pretty sure there were curse words flying—something he wasn’t expecting to see. Tensions on the other bridge were clearly running high.

The American CO tapped his ear again, re-establishing audio. “Send it.” He was speaking off-screen.

Oscar tilted his head. “Is everything okay?”

“We’re receiving a set of images and a video upload from the *Walrus*, sir.” Adams craned her neck back toward him. “What should I do with it?”

He gestured toward the overhead panel. “Put it on.”

Adams did as she was told, and the video started playing.

The sound of feet rustled across the epoxy floor behind him. Both Gianna and Doc Hansen stepped up a moment later.

There, on the computer screen, was a recording from the bridge on board the *Walrus*. It showed Joel and his crew on one half of the

window and a tactical display from one of their controls on the other. The scene around the boats was lit up in LiDAR, and the USS *Oarfish* was coming about on the African *Tefnut*, a modified Soviet November-class submarine. Watching the two of them maneuver in the limited space of the cavern was like watching two fighters in a closet. Except in their case, one was a heavyweight, and the other a flyweight.

“Why isn’t the *Walrus* firing on the *Oarfish*?” Doc Hansen asked.

Oscar studied the video feed from the bridge of the *Walrus* before shifting his attention to the display focused on their controls. It took him a moment, but then he saw it. The crew was flustered, and Joel was gesturing frantically. Time after time, the screens in front of the officer flashed red. “They can’t target another American vessel,” he muttered.

“No kidding.” Adams shook her head. “That could pose a problem.”

As the *Tefnut* was turning, it was also moving backward, working its way out of the cavern. Despite the age of the submarine, the pilot knew what they were doing. If you couldn’t fight in close quarters, then you changed the venue.

There was no way the *Oarfish* was going to fire on the *Tefnut* without a clear shot at its propeller. Anything but a direct hit risked bringing the entire cave system down on them. What he didn’t understand, though, was why the *Oarfish* made a move at all. They knew the restrictions of firing on their own boat. While they could easily take out the *Tefnut*, their only goal seemed to be escaping from the *Walrus*.

With all eyes on the *Oarfish*, Oscar missed the move. It was subtle. Fortunately, he wasn’t in command of the *Walrus* and that boat’s crew were doing their jobs. The *Tefnut* fired a torpedo. Not toward the *Oarfish*, as he’d expected, but aimed squarely at the *Walrus*. He knew now why the *Oarfish* had shown its hand in the first place. It was a decoy. The *Tefnut* wasn’t the only one that had turned sides with the Chinese and the Russians. They both had.

Watching the torpedo float through the water was like watching the world move in slow motion. The trail of turbulence in its wake was all you could make out in the multicolor LiDAR display, but his imagination filled in the gaps. The torpedo itself was invisible.

He winced at the advancing haze on the screen until it disappeared, replaced only by an explosion of colored bubbles midway between the *Tefnut* and the *Walrus*. He reached out, pausing before adjusting the screen. “What just happened?”

Adams was shaking her head. “I... I don’t know. It looks like the *Walrus*—”

“Bloody sonics,” Masters interrupted. “Look!” She leaned forward and pointed at the LiDAR display. A focused force of sound shot out of the tip of the *Walrus*. When it collided with the inbound torpedo, it not only exploded the ordnance, but parts of the waveform radiated outward.

“Holy mother of...” Oscar brought his hand to his mouth and watched in slow motion as the concussive blast that took out the torpedo wreaked havoc on the cavern itself.

One part of the focus beam shot upward and the other toward the ground. When the two components hit solid mass, the result was exploding shrapnel in all directions. The rocks above them pelted both the *Oarfish* and the *Tefnut*.

Boulder after boulder rained down on the fragile boats, breaking them into pieces within seconds. The downpour of rubble was nothing like the pelting stones from the earlier collateral shock miles above. These were multi-meter slabs of rock that had sheared off from the already loosened ceiling of the cave.

As the rain of debris continued, the LiDAR was useless. It was only noise. His attention returned to the bridge of the *Walrus*. The boat, like its African counterpart, was moving backward. Except this one was sliding deeper into the cave system. He could tell by the commotion that the crew was freaking out. They didn’t want to be crushed, not after they’d evaded certain death by the *Tefnut*’s torpedo.

Their pilot skillfully navigated up and down the cavern until they were well out of sight of the battlefield. Only then did they come to a complete stop and turn around, high-tailing it deeper into the darkness.

The bridge on the *Bancroft* was silent for several minutes. They knew what this meant, but no one said it out loud. Not until Larsson broke the silence. "But... what was the explosion we heard earlier?"

"There's a marker about five minutes into the video feed," Adams said. "Let's check out what they wanted us to see." She tweaked her control and jumped forward in time.

The *Walrus* had advanced deeper into the cavern, not far from the central shaft. They were rising over one of the longer inclines and barely navigated through a rock formation. And then the video of the *Walrus's* bridge burst into complete chaos.

Bodies previously standing got knocked onto their asses, and the instrumentation went dark. Only after he watched Joel push up off the floor and wipe at the blood coming from his head did he realize what had happened.

"One of the other subs' reactors went critical." Oscar's hand in the splint started throbbing as his pulse raced. "That must have been what we heard."

"We're dead!" Larsson brought both his hands up to the side of his head. "That's it, we're done for!"

The words hit him like a dagger to the chest, sending him reeling backward into Kel's chair. Their one way out of this circle of hell was buried under a mountain of rubble. Humans weren't a species that made short work of aquatic construction projects. While they'd managed to build a few large-scale exploration and test outposts under the waves, they'd taken years to construct. Humanity had mastered moving earth above ground long ago, but doing the same feats underwater was still unheard of.

There was no way there would be a rescue from the outside. They couldn't move that much rock in time. Not with the limited food they had available. And certainly not with a mutiny at hand.

“I see you caught the end,” Joel said.

Oscar had forgotten about the open camera to the *Walrus*. They must have been watching their reaction the whole time. All he could do was nod. If he’d been alone, he’d probably have broken down.

“What do we do now?” Gianna turned to face him. Her cheeks were covered in tears. In all the years they’d worked and lived together, he’d never seen the woman cry. “We have options. Right?”

He lowered his head into his hands. This was too much to take in. Especially after being shot at, burned, and cut. Now they were trapped in an underwater cave-in and might never see the sun again.

“Can we still send a minnow out to get help?” Masters asked. “You know, out of that tunnel we found.”

“It’s usele—” he began.

“A good plan,” Doc Hansen interrupted. She spun around to face him, a look of disappointment in her eyes. “Why don’t we work with the Americans to raise a tether, sir?”

Oscar knew what she was doing. She was trying to keep morale high. They didn’t need a boat full of dolphins giving up. He’d never been the best at handling human emotions. Boats, he knew those like the back of his hand. He could tear apart an outboard motor and put it back together with his eyes closed. People, on the other hand, always left him baffled.

“Sure.” He waved his hands in front of him. “Why not?”

He pushed up off the chair and groaned. His goddamn knee hurt like a son of a bitch. “Joel, we’re gonna need to recover anything that’s left of our minnows up there. We found a small cave we think we can pilot one out of, and we’re hoping to raise a tether to broadcast depth. Or as close as we can get, anyhow.”

“That’s a negative,” Joel said. “First, you’re going to bring the HMS *Bancroft* up here, and then we’re going to transfer some of my crew on board. After that, I’m taking command of your boat.”

Oscar started laughing. Not a quiet chuckle. An outright belly

laugh. One that was usually quite contagious, but under the circumstances, was completely out of place. The others didn't know what to make of it and stared at him slack-jawed until he froze and straightened his posture.

His face went blank, and he took a step toward the camera nestled above the upper display panel. "Over my cold, dead body you will. This boat is owned by Her Majesty's Navy and is under the command of CO Kel Williams. When she wakes up—"

"If," Joel interrupted, snapping his index finger in the air.

Oscar gritted his teeth. "When... she wakes up, Kel will decide if we turn over command to the likes of you. Until then, you'll let us retrieve our equipment. Is that understood, Captain Friedrich?"

He'd seen Joel pissed off many times in his life. Most of them had been at losing a poker game, or when the Americans got trounced in the World Cup, which was pretty much always. But in all the decades they'd known each other, he'd never seen the man angry in uniform.

Until now.

Joel's face contorted, and his lip quivered. "You will turn over command to me — immediately! Is that understood? You washed-up wrench. You should have retired a decade ago. I'll have you up on charges with AAFEUS when—"

He reached forward and hit the kill switch, dropping the bridge into silence. A burden had left him. He couldn't say when exactly. Maybe it was when he told Joel off. Or perhaps it was when he realized their fate had already been sealed. Either way, he was without worry. Things couldn't get worse than they were.

"Masters!" He spun to face the coxswain.

"Yes... sir." She swallowed hard.

"We appear to have lost communications with the *Walrus*. They've fallen off our tracking. It's strange." He shook his head. "For now, you're to direct the minnow up and into that cavern for a look-see. Retrieve anything you can. Best case, we bring one of our fish back home. Worst case, we get some fiber. Is that understood?"

Masters glanced at Adams and then at him. "Of course, sir. Right away." She shifted in her chair and started piloting the minnow.

He turned to face his CIS. "Adams, first you're gonna share that video with the rest of the boat. Then you're gonna demand they stand down and let us get some food to our people in Weapons. I want untampered rations for a week, and I want them in under an hour. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir. I think so." Adams reached up and wiped away a tear from her cheek. "What do we do after that, sir?"

"Larsson!" He spun around to face his other coxswain. "You're gonna pilot that other minnow and root around every corner of this place. I don't care if you broadcast our location to the moon and back. I want every square meter of this cavern mapped out. Is that understood?"

"I'm on it." He turned and opened a direct line with Weapons to prepare them for the deployment of their final minnow.

Oscar took a deep breath and nodded at Adams before turning around. "Doctor, let's talk about waking up our captain, shall we?"

Dot to Dot



Doc Hansen rolled his eyes and “wake her up” simple. We can’t just shoot her full of Herbolants and “wake her up” simple. When we can’t pass out like that, especially after they’ve experienced a head injury, you can’t risk waking them up using drugs. If you do, you could give her permanent brain damage.”

Oscar sighed. “I don’t think you’re grokking our situation.” He checked the hatch to make sure it was closed. He hadn’t sealed it with the speed wheel, but it was locked tight.

When he spun around, she was staring at him with her hands on her hips. “Doc, we need her. I’m up to my neck, and the water is rising. I’ll admit I’m out of my league.”

“Maybe we should reach out to Collins. He’s—”

“A fuckin’ traitor!” He slammed his hand against the wall to his right.

She gestured with her palms downward. “I know, but you need to calm down. If you gave me a second to explain, I was merely gonna suggest you get his advice on the situation, not turn over the boat to him. No one wants that.”

“I’m not sure Kel would like me asking him for guidance on running her boat. No.” He shook his head. “I won’t do it. I need you to wake her up. Can’t you use an ammonia capsule or something?”

Doc Hansen chuckled and stared down at her hands before collapsing into the tiny wall chair behind her. “This isn’t a low-budget online serial, Oscar. We can’t simply wave a vial under a

patient's nose and have them magically wake up, unless they're faking it or on drugs. And even then, you don't do it if they have asthma. You could end up constricting their airways and kill them."

"I... didn't know Kel had asthma." He slumped against the hatch.

"She doesn't." Doc Hansen glanced up at him. "At least I don't think she does, but she's not as fit as an ox anymore. She's like you and me. We're getting thicker around the middle, and we're up in the years. Adult-onset asthma isn't uncommon for many people, and I'm not chancing it."

He nodded. She wasn't helping matters. He could really use Kel to be awake. They were better as a team than solo. He knew it, and Kel did too. She'd said as much when they started their commercial undersea enterprise. Things seemed simpler back then. Draw some pretty pictures, get a little venture capital, spend someone else's money, and have fun building a future that didn't include torpedoes. Worst case, you pissed off some investors when you flopped. No big whoop. He always had his pension to fall back on.

At least he wouldn't die like his father, unable to cope with the world outside his boat. Instead, he'd meet his maker at the bottom of the Pacific. Something his dad had only dreamed of.

Doc Hansen leaned down, forcing eye contact. "You okay?"

He did his best to straighten up and brushed at his tattered shirt. "Yeah. I just need to clear my head. I'm gonna clean up. Mind if I use Kel's shower? It's the only one we have, and it's hooked into the isolated purification system."

"Of course." She pushed up off her knees. "Let me grab you a change of clothes from Collins' footlocker. You and him aren't that far off in size."

"Thanks," he muttered.

She smiled and made her way past him, turning the handle to swing the latch outward.

He'd have to check over Collins' personal space when he got cleaned up. There could be some clues in there about who else he

was working with. That, and maybe he could get inside the man's head. He'd always felt that his egotistical speeches were a front for something more.

Oscar pulled the hatch closed but didn't latch it. He then stripped down as quickly as he could with his one good hand. Only after he was bare naked and carefully peeled off the splint did he realize Kel was lying right behind him. A shiver quaked through his entire body. He'd forgotten all about her. She was breathing but hadn't moved since he arrived on the bridge a few hours ago.

It was like she was already gone, not to mention it was weird being naked in front of her. She was old enough to be his daughter. He'd be quick. He needed this shower. If he was going to think straight, he had to get the rest of this oil off his body. Besides that, he stunk like an outhouse. The only reason someone hadn't said anything was because he was in charge. The surest fire way to silence a sailor was to ask them what they thought of their superior officer when they were standing next to them.

As he stepped into her phone-booth-sized loo, he pulled the door closed. The space was nice. Heck, he could actually spin around without knocking his elbows on anything. When he turned on the water, he caught his breath. It was way warmer than below deck. Kel had been holding out on him. She had the goddamn Taj Mahal up here, while he had a public outhouse in the Arctic down near Engineering.

He counted down to zero, having spun in place to make sure he got every part of him wet. When the water didn't stop after ten seconds, he searched for the off button. After failing to find one for another ten seconds, it shut off.

"That's not fair," he muttered, having realized what happened. She got twice as much water as the rest of the crew, too. He'd have to talk to her when this mission was over. Certainly, he was entitled to longer showers after having been the acting CO and all.

A smile eased across his face, and his cheeks warmed. The water was already washing away his gloom. The fact that he was thinking

beyond today was a good first step.

He reached over and pumped a handful of the heavy-duty degreasing soap. No boat left port without it. The receptacle pump in her shower was stiff, which made sense; Kel probably rarely used it. He was actually surprised she had any at all, but at the same time, he was thankful. There was no way in hell the regular soap would get the grime off. While the oily smell might linger, at least he wouldn't look like a grease monkey.

After he sudsed up and had thoroughly rubbed away a layer of skin with the sandpapery soap, he pushed the rinse button. If this one was like the first, he'd have forty solid seconds of rinsing bliss. He took full advantage of the perk, taking extra long to wash off and apply some of Kel's better-smelling soap at the end. Even doing it one-handed, he had ample time to bask in the downpour of water.

The entire experience was surreal, and yet it was under three minutes from start to finish. Sailors were always efficient with their water rations, even surrounded by death; they had to be to survive.

When he finished drip-drying, he opened the door, being careful to cover his privates. He wasn't sure where she kept the towel. Doc Hansen had apparently slipped in while he was showering. The woman must have sprinted through Collins' quarters because folded at the foot of Kel's bed were a towel, a change of clothes, and his splint.

As he stepped out of the warmth of the tiny room, the cold of the *Bancroft* sent shivers up his spine. He had never taken a hot shower on a sub. It was a strange feeling coming out of the heat. Maybe that was why they kept the rest of the boat's water frigid; it was freezing in this place, and it was easier to give the dolphins something to look forward to back at home. Cheaper, too.

He hopped into the clothes she'd laid out, trying hard not to think about who else's body had been in them previously. Right about now, he didn't care. He was simply happy they were clean and didn't reek of week-old body funk.

Once he'd pulled the shirt on, he eased the splint over his hand and paused, checking himself in the mirror. He looked like a preppy professor. The doc had grabbed him a rust-colored turtleneck. While beggars couldn't be choosers, this wasn't remotely comfortable.

He eyed Kel. If she weren't a third smaller than him, he might rustle through her trunk. She at least wore standard naval coveralls, though hers were far nicer. He never understood why Collins wore the clothes he did; it must've been his way of showing his superiority over his people.

Content with not being covered in grease, he exited Kel's quarters and headed a few doors aft, into Collins' compartment. When he entered, it was like *déjà vu*; the space was a mirror of his own below deck. The only difference was that while he'd decorated his with memories from his life, this one was void of any and all personality.

There were no tchotchkes, no medals, and no pictures or personal effects. Oscar lifted the mattress and opened the few drawers in the room, but each was as barren as the last. It was like the man lacked a history. Either that, or it made it easier for him to disappear.

When he cracked open the footlocker, he found various colored turtlenecks, trousers, and underwear. Except for a few different shirt styles, the locker was just as void of personal touches. As he was closing the lid, he paused; with the lid nearly shut, the fabric liner on the inside tilted down. The glue must have gone bad and lost its adhesion.

He lifted the lid open and reached over, pulling back the loose liner. There, stuffed into the fabric void, were several scraps of paper. Scrawled on each of them were what appeared to be latitude, longitude, and depth—a trio of numbers not uncommon for a dolphin, especially an XO or a captain. Hidden in a footlocker, however, was another matter entirely.

His mind raced through what the numbers could mean. Maybe Collins was planning a holiday, or maybe they were the points he

took command of the *Bancroft* or any previous boat he'd commanded. There was only one way to find out.

The hatch to Collins' quarters clanged shut as he slammed it on his way out. He made quick work of the meters between the former XO's quarters and the bridge.

"Bring up a map of the world," he said aloud as he slid up behind his team.

Adams spun around to face him. "XO on the—"

"Not now," he interrupted. "Bring up the world map and plot these coordinates." He handed her the pile of neatly stacked papers.

She squinted at them and shuffled through each sheet one at a time. "Where'd you get these?"

Masters leaned toward her, eyeing the stack.

He pointed up at the map on the monitor. "Let's focus on the numbers first. Okay?"

"Aye, sir," Adams muttered. She set the stack of paper on the flat surface next to her monitors and entered each of the coordinate sets, plotting them in three dimensions on the world map.

As the points popped up on the screen, it felt like she was creating a dot-to-dot children's puzzle. Some were up near the ocean surface, and others were down deep. When the cluster of dots appeared off the top of South America, his stomach tightened.

He leaned forward and tapped the monitor at the point between Antarctica and Brazil. "There! Is that where I think it is?"

The map zoomed in, but before he had a chance to study anything, Adams overlaid the route the *Bancroft* had taken around the two continents to get to the Mariana Trench; the paths were an exact match, point for point.

Oscar took a step backward, struggling to keep his anger at bay. "Talk to me about that point." He gestured toward the coordinates he'd zoomed into. "When were we there? What happened?"

"I... don't have access to that," Adams said. "I'll need—"

He lurched forward and practically yanked her keyboard off its mount, stomping out the commands to give her access to those

records. Each click of her keys was like a needle in his chest. A moment later, he leaned down and offered up his eye to the retinal scanner attached to her controls.

When he stood up straight, she didn't hesitate. She cracked open the records and began merging the data sets together. One at a time, the dots sprang to life on the screen, each with more detail than before.

Reaching out, his finger paused over the dot on the screen. Part of him already knew what was there, but he had to see it with his own eyes. He had to know for sure.

He tapped the point below South America, and the details appeared.

Date: 10/25/2055 @ 17:52:31

Depth: 100 meters

Target: AAFEUS Satellite F7G3

Payload: Instrumentation and schematic upload of exercise off South America with a salvaged Chinese beacon.

Message: Mission was a success. Status of HMS *Bancroft* is nominal. Continuing on original planned route. Operating 23 hours behind schedule, but we intend to make up time en route.

It looked like Kel's regular upload to the satellite. What he didn't understand was why this message. Why would Collins write down these coordinates?

"I don't get it." He shook his head. "Is there something more here?"

“Sir,” Masters said. “Can I get access to the payload? Maybe I can find something in what the captain uploaded.”

He glanced at her for a moment and then back at Adams. She was shrugging.

“Why not?” He adjusted the collar of his turtleneck. “Go ahead. Share it with her.”

Adams issued the command to share the data. She then tweaked the map and rapidly flipped through the rest of the points from the paper sheets. After a few dozen coordinates, she froze and started shaking her head.

“What is it? What do you see?” He leaned closer to her display. Some of the dots weren’t far from their current location.

“A bunch of these points were along our original route before AAFEUS Command rerouted us,” Adams began. “These last three, though. They’re near us, but... we’ve never been to them. Not yet, anyhow.” She highlighted a point further up the Trench and then two others nearby, much deeper than their current depth.

The first point seemed familiar. Not a number he’d seen before, per se, more its relative position to where they were. And then it hit him.

“We got you, you prick!” He squeezed the pole to his right. They’d seen that point earlier.

“Who, sir?” Larsson craned his neck and squinted at Adams’ display.

Adams leaned closer to the screen, and then it must’ve dawned on her too. She visibly recoiled in her chair.

“Adams sees it.” He watched as she started flipping through her screens, searching for the log with the data from the previous day. The one from their minnow near the mouth of the cave system. Once she found them, she quickly scanned until she spotted what she was looking for.

When she read the numbers, she slapped her hand on her workstation. “They’re almost a dead-to-nuts match for the location of the Chinese distress signal. Off by a few hundredths, but that

could be due to any number of reasons.”

Oscar stepped sideways to Masters’ machine. “Tell me you found something in the payload.”

She was shaking her head. “It appears to be precisely what it said it was. Schematics of the tech we salvaged from the Chinese beacon, the *Bancroft’s* reactor and hardware logs, crew rotation schedules, and food consumption rates. I don’t see anything out of the—”

“Wait,” he interrupted, leaning forward and grabbing the keyboard. “Why would we upload crew schedules or food consumption data? Command wouldn’t need that.”

“They would if the estimates changed.” Doc Hansen walked up behind him. “I’ve had to send the data before. It’s needed by the bean counters to make sure we’re not missing something on our end. Everything has a check and balance, especially when it comes to supplies.”

He stood up straight and stared at the map, willing himself to remember those days. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t. The past few weeks were a blur in his mind. While he normally had amazing recall, being shot at and cut open had apparently fried his ability to recollect what he’d been doing only yesterday.

“I think... I found something!” Masters’ voice had the excited squeak of a kid on Christmas morning.

“Whatcha got?” he asked, again leaning closer to her.

“We changed the crew rotation schedule after we salvaged the beacon.” Master glanced at him. “You weren’t up here then, sir. Anyhow,” she returned her attention back to the screen. “Hinault rotated through Weapons to help with the salvage and burned an entire day down there. He was the one who put together this data for the captain to share. He and a small team were burning the midnight oil nonstop to rip the mechanical beast apart.”

“I’ll be damned,” he muttered.

“What?” Adams said.

He ran his hand through his hair. “If my memory didn’t take a

piss, Klein was down there helping him, right?”

Masters scanned through the data. “Yessir. It was Klein, Hinault, Johnson, and Daven.”

“Daven! That’s him. Tall bloke.” Oscar raised his hands up over his head. “Black hair, thin as a rail, has a tattoo of a blue phone booth on his arm?”

Doc Hansen drew in her breath and stepped up closer to them.

Masters chuckled. “That’s the guy. He fancies himself a sci-fi buff. That phone booth is a TARDIS, sir. You know, from the show with the Doctor who travels through time?”

Oscar shook his head and the burn on his knee throbbed. “I never understood that make-believe stuff. I preferred tearing apart real things like classic cars and household gadgets. It doesn’t matter, though. Everyone who was down there working on that Chinese beacon has turned out to be a traitor. Daven’s the wanker I knocked out in Engineering. He was Klein’s muscle.”

“Is that where you got these sheets of paper with the coordinates?” Doc Hansen crossed her arms.

She knew he was planning to check out Collins’ quarters, especially after their conversation. There was no point in hiding it now. “I found them in Collins’ personal effects, along with a whole lot of nothing. His quarters were practically empty.”

“I was gonna mention that later.” Doc Hansen shook her head. “It was weird walking in there, almost as if he was packed and ready to disappear on a moment’s notice.”

He raised his left hand and itched at the splint; it felt like there were ants under the bandages. “Has there been any word from the rest of the boat since we shared the footage?”

Adams chimed in. “From the number of times it has been watched, it’s caused quite a stir.” She tweaked her controls and brought up cameras from throughout the ship.

There was a huge crowd in the galley and recreation room. Many of the people were gesturing frantically at each other, and some getting very animated.

He scanned the dozen or so camera views but didn't see him. "Where's Collins?"

"Last I saw him," Adams began, "he was huddled down in Engineering with Klein. The hatch was sealed shut, and they were watching the video." She brought up the cameras in that section of the ship and flipped through them, shaking her head. "I don't see him now, though."

"There!" Oscar leaned forward and pointed at the camera from main engineering. It didn't show Collins, but that wasn't what he was pointing at; the door to his quarters was open.

"I don't have a camera into your space, sir."

"It's alright; I know what he's after. Open a comm on the boat-wide channel—every section except for Engineering."

"Aye, sir!" Adams frantically tapped away at her controls, setting up the connection.

Doc Hansen leaned closer to him. "Are you sure about this?"

"As sure as I'll ever be." He pointed at the camera mounted atop the main wall panel and nodded toward Adams. "When you're ready, Officer."

She held up her fingers, counting down from three to one before pointing at the green light above the panel.

He stiffened and took a deep breath. "This is XO Allen on the bridge. Many of you know me as the Bull Nuke. To say it's been a crazy few days would be an understatement. You've all seen the footage by now. I'm also sure you've heard about my roughing up your fellow dolphins, searching for a traitor among you. Well, that footage is the result of our enemies fighting over the *Bancroft*. I'm not gonna stand here and lie to you; that's not my thing. But I'll tell you this: Our options are limited, especially with our captain down for the count and our former XO hunkered down in Engineering. What you all don't know, however, is that Thomas Collins was one of the traitors. He was working with Müller and Hinault the entire time; the same can be said for Klein and a few of the others."

Adams had brought up the cameras from throughout the boat

and spread them out across multiple monitors for him to see. The shock on the faces of the crew was encouraging enough for him to continue.

“Our CIS is about to share with you some evidence we found in Mr. Collins’ quarters only moments ago. I won’t tell you how to interpret it; you’re all smart people. Besides, I think it speaks for itself.”

Oscar reached down, pulled the XO insignias out of his pocket, and tacked them onto the collar of the turtleneck.

“Many of you weren’t even aware that CO Williams promoted me to XO, so I’m not surprised by your actions today. While some of you knew Collins was in the brig for a short while, you didn’t know why. The fact is, your captain put him there, and for good reason too. He undermined her command, and now we know why; he sold us out and he put all of your lives at risk, just like he’s doing now.” He swallowed hard and stared at the camera, struggling to find his words and a path forward. As the silence lingered, his mind drifted to Kel.

“While I wish the CO could tell you more, she’s still not conscious because of the altercation with Hinault on the bridge. I know I can’t convince you that the captain promoted me to XO, but unfortunately she can’t either.”

He glanced over his shoulder and around the room. “But I can do something even better; I can ask that Doc Hansen and the other members of your crew up here on the bridge tell you. They can share their knowledge of the situation and my promotion. Before they do, though, I have one last thing to say.”

His expression stiffened as his eyebrows narrowed, his piercing gaze staring squarely at the camera. “Collins is no longer your XO. Every second you listen to him, you put our lives in jeopardy and you let our enemies get closer to killing us—all of us. Until you can come to grips with that, we won’t be safe. We need to take complete control of the *Bancroft*. And if we don’t... well, then we’ll die.”

When he looked to his left, Masters and Larsson were staring at him with tears in their eyes. Maybe they hadn't realized how dire things were until he laid it all out on the table; it was the truth, though, and they needed to hear it—all the crew did.

He nodded toward his coxswain. "Go ahead, Larsson; why don't you start? You've been on duty the longest. I'm going back to check on the captain." He turned in place and stepped around Doc Hansen and Gianna; they were both standing alongside him.

No one said anything else to him; they merely nodded as he passed, each person lost in their own thoughts. He imagined many of them were thinking about their family and friends back home; his mind, however, was elsewhere. It was focused on one person: Collins. He was going to kill that man if it was the last thing he ever did.

Interlude

The Builders

Her eyes screwed up his face, and Willow watched her for the umpteenth time; except on this occasion, his fingertips started glowing. It was the same yellow hue she'd seen earlier when he tried to manipulate the shard.

Willow clenched her jaw and double-checked her protections. "You can't affect the fragment from here. You know that, right?"

He spun around to face her. "You see it, don't you?" He pointed at the projection. "Isn't it obvious? Oscar is the cancer on their ship. He's like the tempest they never anticipated. The failure of that captain we were watching earlier gave him power, and now their ship is in turmoil."

Her lips curled into a forced smirk as she battled to contain her mounting frustration with him. Conversing with his ego had become an insufferable ordeal she no longer had the patience for. "It's a boat, not a ship." She turned to lock eyes with him, her gaze as cutting as a blade. "And no, I don't see it. In fact, I see quite the opposite."

With a flick of her wrist, she brought up a second portal showing Collins and Klein sweating and cursing as they desperately slammed their fists against the control panels in Engineering.

"Damn these fail-safes!" Klein screamed and hurried starboard, climbing up a ladder.

Collins spun around, searching for someone to lash out at. "You!

What's your name?"

Cary recoiled, probably wishing he'd been somewhere else at that point. "Cary, sir." He swallowed hard.

"Alright, Mary." Collins stormed up to within centimeters of the dolphin's face. "I need you to double-time it aft and unlock that tow cable."

Cary's eyes went wide. "But... if we drop it here, while we're navigating these caves, we'll—"

"That's not a request, Mary!" He leaned closer to the dolphin. "That's a goddamn order. Is that understood?"

Willow felt bad for the poor lad. He was practically shaking in his boots.

"You see that look of desperation in Collins' eyes?" She ran her hand over the projection of his mouth. "That spittle right there, that's uncontrollable rage. And not the sort one gets from being certain they're in the right. No. It's from knowing he sold out his kin and now he's scrambling to protect himself."

She glanced back at Helios, and he was staring at her; his eyes echoed those of Collins. He wasn't even trying to suppress his emotions anymore.

When she returned her attention to the scene playing out in Engineering, it hit her. His indignation wasn't aimed toward all humans. It was these people. He hadn't just chosen his side; he'd been driving it, and this was the battlefield he was fighting on.

There in the gaze of Collins, she could make out the telltale signs of a Builder in control. His pupils were dilated, and his actions, while not completely out of character, were nonetheless unhinged even for him. While she couldn't tell which of Helios' minions was manipulating the human mind, the greenish shimmer of their pupil was unmistakably unnatural.

"You can't foretell what happens in the minds of these mortals." Helios went to reach out toward the portal showing Collins and flinched back, masking it as a hand wave. "He's a man on the edge, fighting to stay alive. It's innate to his kind. A primitive instinct, if I

remember right. Nothing more.”

Willow fought back the desire to banish him from her domain. She needed to focus on figuring out what he was after, and having him here was probably best. Being in the presence of one’s enemy assured they were in reach to strike, but then again, the gesture cut both ways.

Fresh Wounds



K when your hands break down right in front of you and you feel home and you've forgotten your gloves on the counter. Oscar took her hand in his and brought his other one up, pausing when they met. The confounded splint made the simplest of gestures impossible.

"Screw it," he muttered, ripping the bandages off. He refused to spend what could be his last days any more uncomfortable than he had to be. It was bad enough he was confined to the bridge.

He tossed the carcass of the splint on the floor and carefully took her hands in his, rubbing them together. While he had to be careful of his stitches, it felt good to let his hand breathe.

"I was wondering how long you were gonna last." Doc Hansen stepped into the ready room. He hadn't bothered to shut the door. "Gianna had two hours. I bet longer; said you knew better. It was close, but I guess she knows your quirks better than I do."

"I'm not wearing that thing at the end of the—"

"Don't you say it!" she interrupted, lurching forward and jabbing her finger against his chest. "You're the bloody XO. You can't go talking about the end of anything, unless it's this coup. Not after that little speech turned the crew around. Your job is to keep morale high, not circling the drain."

He peered up at her, furrowing his brow. Apparently, he'd missed the show.

“Well, your words helped get them started. I sorta think Gianna’s motherly talk pushed them over the edge, though.” She smiled. “I swear, half the boat was crying.”

He stared down at Kel’s hand in his. It wasn’t cold anymore, but he’d smeared the iodine from his cut all over her palm. “Crap. Can you grab me a wet cloth?”

Doc Hansen stepped over to Kel’s basin and dampened a washcloth she picked up from the tiny shelf outside the door. After squeezing most of the water out, she handed it to him.

“Thanks.” He took it and wiped the yellow sterilizer off Kel’s palm before carefully cleaning his own. When he was done, he wadded up the cloth and stared at the ball in his hands. The splotches of yellow combined with the pale blue cotton to make muddy green streaks. The mix-up made it seem like he was holding a slice of the planet. “So, what happened with the crew?”

She leaned back against the doorjamb. “Halla broke down when we got to the uplink from the beacon. She said that Hinault kicked her out of Weapons during their analysis. While they were working on the teardown, he tweaked the schematics somehow and she caught the bastard doing it. When she confronted him, he lost it and tossed her. She said Daven threatened to flush her out a torpedo tube if she didn’t learn her place.”

“I don’t feel so bad burning that twat.” He flipped the wad of cloth over. The other side had a splotch of iodine on it that looked like Australia. He’d always wanted to visit there.

“You burned him? You never said that earlier.” She leaned forward and snatched the washcloth out of his hand and started rinsing it off, her hands shaking the entire time.

“I was sorta fighting for my life and had to cover my tracks. Besides, he burned himself first.” He eyed her. She was acting strangely. “Are you—”

The wall panel in the ready room flashed, and a ringing sound echoed through the tiny space. On the display was Collins’ face. He was in Engineering, and Klein was standing behind him at the

computer console. He could tell from the way Collins was smiling at the camera that they knew Kel's doors were open. Next time he was working with the engineers back home, they needed to rethink his backdoor. Maybe make it prompt for a password every twenty minutes or something.

The ringing echoed again, drilling into his head.

"Aren't you gonna answer it?" Doc Hansen asked.

"I will." He stood up slowly before adjusting his shirt to smooth out the creases. "I'm making them wait. There's no point in them thinking they have the upper hand."

She tilted her head. "Don't they?"

"Not as much as they think." He stepped over the hatch threshold into the ready room and stopped in front of the camera, waiting for one more ring. Collins was growing impatient. He could tell by the wrinkles on his forehead and his quivering lip.

When the last ring echoed through the small space, he leaned forward and tapped the button on the screen to connect the line. "Captain Williams' quarters, XO Oscar Allen speaking. How may I help you, Mr. Collins?" He forced his widest smile.

"About damn..." Collins froze and his right eye twitched. "Is that... my turtleneck you're wearing?"

Oscar nodded and reached up, stretching the neck out. "Yeah, it's a bit stuffy, but it works. Your boxers, though, fit great. Nice pick. I hate tighty-whities. Thanks, mate." He paused and adjusted his waistband for good measure. "What can I do ya for?" Chuckles leaked in from the other side of the camera. He couldn't tell if it was Klein or their other cronies, but they were having trouble holding back laughter at Collins' expense.

The vein in the old man's neck was throbbing. On these high-definition panels, it almost looked as if there were a leech on his skin; it was bulging so much.

"Oh, yeah." Oscar held up his finger. "I found your stash of coordinates as well. They map out a nice route through the ocean. Too bad we diverged from your original course. Hey, how long did

it take you to plan that out? It must have been years in the making.”

Collins’ face went blank. He was lost for words. In all the time he’d known the man, he had always had something snide to say when confronted or caught off guard. Until now.

“XO,” Adams said, leaning into the ready room. “Sorry for interrupting.”

“Hold on a second, Mr. Collins.” Oscar leaned forward and muted his side before turning to face Adams. “Is he pissed?”

She peeked around him and grinned. “Like an alley cat being given a bath, sir.”

He smiled and then gestured with his hand. “Whatcha need?”

“It’s the crew.” She returned her attention to him. “A bunch of them have formed up armed positions outside Engineering. They say they’re not letting Collins and his people out alive. They’re also adamant about getting some food and water into Weapons. What should we do?”

Things were finally turning in their favor, but they needed to be careful. There was no telling who else within the crew was in Collins’ pocket. “Tell them to leave the food outside the entrance to Weapons and then to clear out. Don’t let Marín open that hatch until they’re several compartments back. If they ask, tell ’em we’re taking precautions.”

“Aye, sir.” She spun around and headed back toward her station.

When he turned, Collins was gesturing frantically at Klein. Trouble seemed to be brewing in Engineering, and they had forgotten to blur their side. He leaned forward and reconnected his end.

“What do you mean they’re blockading us in? I thought that twat Christine had everything under—” Collins began.

“Sir!” Klein leaned forward and whispered in his ear.

Collins spun around. “Allen! You can’t just leave us hanging like that.”

He reached out and killed the line.

“Why’d you cut him off?” Doc Hansen asked, stepping out of Kel’s quarters.

“Don’t worry. He’ll call back.” Oscar whirled toward her. “Go tell Adams about Christine. We need to reach out to our people on the other side. Get them to lock Christine down. Quick! Make sure they’re armed and on the lookout for others too.”

She froze, her eyes wide.

“Go, go!” He waved her out.

The doc didn’t have to be told again. She was up and over the ready room threshold and sprinting forward before he finished waving his arm.

As he turned back toward the display, it sprang to life, ringing to get his attention. Collins’ face was in the center, but this time his expression was empty. Like he’d lost the wind from his sails. Once it rang a few more times, he activated it.

“Captain Williams’ quarters, XO—” he began.

“Cut the crap, Oscar,” Collins interrupted. “What are your demands?”

He furrowed his brows and he tilted his head slightly. “I’m not sure I understand. My... demands?”

“To give up. To turn the boat over to us. We both know that Engineering is the linchpin of any submarine. Without it—”

“We’ll manage,” Oscar interrupted. “We might only be at ten percent power, but we’ll get by.”

Behind Collins, Klein smashed something down against his workbench. “Fuckin’ asshole! I swear, I’m gonna throttle him.”

Oscar chuckled and reached into his pocket. “Are you looking for this?” He held up the XO key to the maneuvering room and started flipping it over and over in his hand.

Klein spun around. “When did you—”

“When you and Collins were acting out your little fake-out takeover. I fell for it hook, line, and sinker, but I wasn’t about to leave my keys to the castle sitting around. Hell, man, I thought you knew why I went into my quarters.” He chuckled. “I guess I

misjudged you. All this time, I assumed you were as sharp as a tack... tsk, tsk." He shook his head and grinned.

Klein lurched forward. "I'm gonna choke your goddamn neck, you—"

He reached out and cut the line. "That was fun," he whispered.

With the room now silent, he could feel the drumbeat of his heart in his ears. Somehow, he'd kept his cool despite his body willing his anger to break loose. He didn't know how he'd done it, but he was glad he had.

The panel flashed on a third time and started ringing.

He wasn't going to do this again. Not yet. He leaned over and gently pulled Kel's inner hatch closed, so she wouldn't be bothered with the endless ringing. With the latch sealed but still able to be opened from his side, he reached over and lowered the volume on the panel. He didn't shut it off, but he made it a whisper of its former loudness. Happy with that, he turned and stepped over the threshold, making his way toward the bridge.

"Talk to me," he said as he walked up behind his crew.

"Yessir," Adams began. "Weapons has been fed. They said thank you and are awaiting your next orders. Over here on monitor number two," she gestured up at the overhead screen, "we have Negal and one of her cohorts. They were just detained by Parker and his people down in the galley."

Oscar leaned forward, squinting at the screen. He couldn't make out who was with Negal.

"It's Sanchez," Doc Hansen said. "He's a new oxygen thief."

"Careful," he muttered. "They're not all bad. Let's not forget about Cary. I wouldn't be here without him."

"Speaking of which." Adams brought up a camera view from Engineering. It was a picture of Cary. He was back in one of the aft bays, working on something.

"What's he doing?" He tweaked the display to zoom in.

"Can't tell," Adams began. "He keeps playing with the light switch on the bench, though. Friggin' flashes it on and off and then

goes back to fiddling with whatever he has locked in that vise.”

Oscar watched the oxygen thief as he stepped away from the workbench and grasped the light. He then flicked it on and off, repeating it eight times before returning to his work. It happened fast, like he'd done it before. Like he'd been doing it for years.

He slapped his hand against the back of her chair. “Blast! He’s talking to us.”

“What?” Adams shook her head. “How? It’s not Morse code. I’ve been checking that. The count is correct, but the letters make no sense. He’s repeating the letters C and Q a lot, but most of the time it’s gibberish.”

“That’s it. CQ.” He raised his hands into the air.

Adams and the others glanced at him, confusion masking their faces.

He chuckled. “Someday, you need to buy yourself an amateur radio setup. CQ is what a wireless operator broadcasts to let anyone listening know they’re there and receiving.”

“What... should we say back?” Adams asked.

They needed more time before he could answer that. While he knew Cary was there, he didn’t expect him to be so ready and willing to help. Things must be bad down in Engineering.

He ran his left hand through his hair; the prickly stitches scraped against his scalp. They reminded him of the freshness of the wound. “I need you to transmit back the letters A and S, in that order.”

Adams wrote the letters on a piece of paper beside her station. “Why those two?”

“They mean ‘Stand By’. We don’t have a plan yet, but we’ll get one. Can you do it? Can you transmit them along with some other randomness like he is? Maybe flash a different light panel down there or something else near him.”

“I can try.” She exhaled and started digging through the controls at her disposal, looking for anything she could use to signal him.

Oscar spun around and headed toward Kel’s ready room.

“Sir!” Larsson said.

“Yes!” He turned in place. “That’s right. I forgot about our coxswains. All ahead full. I want to be at that cave you all discovered as fast as our muzzled Mr. *Bancroft* can take us. Is that understood?”

“Yessir!” Larsson said, rotating around in his chair.

“Should I have Weapons prep a minnow, sir?” Masters asked.

He nodded. “Yes. And ask Marín if they’d be able to access our tether and raise it without help from Engineering. Tell her I won’t be cross if she damages anything in the process, just so long as she doesn’t kill us.”

Masters’ eyes went wide. “Ok. I mean, yes, sir.”

He needed to watch his tongue. Doc Hansen was right. Everyone was on a razor’s edge down here, and even the smallest misinterpretation could break someone. And they couldn’t afford to lose a dolphin up here on the bridge. They were the only people he could truly trust.

“What can I do?” Gianna was rocking back and forth, her hands searching for something to keep them busy.

There was so much to do. He hadn’t thought about everyone. Without a plan, he could only be on defense. That reminded him. “I need you to search through Kel’s quarters for the other key to the maneuvering room. It looks a lot like this.” He pulled the key out of his pocket and held it up. When she reached for it, he yanked it away. “Nope. Look, but don’t touch.”

She tilted her head. “What do I do when I find the other one?”

“Hide it somewhere else. I can’t risk that Kel told Collins where she hides her key. This way, if you find it and hide it, then only we know where it is. If these keys fall into their hands, then they can take control of this entire boat without us.”

“That doesn’t seem very smart. Whose idea was that?”

He shook his head and chuckled before turning to make his way toward the ready room. “Mine.”

Tie Breaker



When the suited king welcomed his arrival, the waiter was still on hand, and the Oscar walked meekly to his room. He waited for Gianna to slip past him and then turned to answer it.

“Captain Williams’ quarters, XO Allen speaking. How may I... Oh, it’s you.” He reached forward, faking to turn it off.

“No!” Collins waved his hand at the camera. “Wait.”

He paused and lingered for a second before stepping back away from the screen. His goal was to keep Collins thinking, at least until he had a plan to take the traitor out.

Oscar crossed his arms. “What do you want, Thomas?” He tilted his head and reached his hand out to touch the wall of the ready room. The vibration meant only one thing.

“Where are we moving the *Bancroft* to?” Collins asked.

He snickered. “You think I’m daft? I’m not about to tell you that, you twat.”

“Wherever you’re taking us, we can—”

“Do absolutely fuck all,” he interrupted, clenching his fist behind his back. “Klein knows it, and you know it. You may have suppressed the power going into the pump-jet, but you can’t cut it. So, what do you want? I’m busy.”

Collins bit his lip. “We need food.”

“Sorry, the galley’s closed.” He leaned forward to kill the line.

“Wait!”

He sighed and stepped backward. This was more fun than he’d

imagined it would be. “Last chance. What—do—you—want?”

“We’ll give you full power.”

Klein spun around behind him. “What are you—”

Collins waved a hand to shut him up. “Did you hear me? We’ll give you—”

“I heard you, eejit.” He groaned quietly, shifting his stance to take some weight off his burned knee. “In exchange for what?”

“In exchange for my safe passage onto the bridge.” Collins raised his eyebrows.

Oscar glanced to his left and made eye contact with Gianna. She was shaking her head. He knew she wouldn’t want him here. What he couldn’t understand, though, was why Collins would want to be here in the first place. They could take him out in a second, and then all they’d have was Klein to deal with.

Gianna raised her hand, flashing something at him. His eyes went wide. She’d found the other key to the maneuvering room. All they had to do was hide it and let Collins up here. Then they’d be that much closer to ending this.

“What do you say?” Collins asked, breaking the silence.

He shook his head. “Why do you want to be on the bridge? What’s your angle?”

“We’re starved,” Collins began, “and you’ve got a lynch mob outside our door. We’re all but dead, anyway. If we turn ourselves over, we’re dead. If we wait you out, we’re dead. I figured you and I could chat. What could it hurt?”

Waiting them out hadn’t occurred to him. Not with Cary and the other dolphins down there being held against their will. The fact that Collins had revealed how deranged he was showed how little he thought of the crew.

“Give me a minute,” Oscar began, “I need to see what the others think.”

“What others?” Collins leaned closer to the camera. “Is Kel awake?”

He clenched his jaw. “My people here on the bridge. I’m not

sure how comfortable they'd be allowing a rat in their midst. I'll let you know." He reached out and cut the line.

Gianna lurched forward and jabbed her finger into his chest. "You're not gonna let him in here, are you?"

"Ouch." He rubbed his breastbone. "Chill out. Like I said, if we don't agree, then he's not coming in."

"I'll slit his bloody throat if he comes near me." Gianna pushed past him and turned aft.

Oscar took a deep breath and stepped out of the ready room, working his way toward the bridge. When he eased up behind the others, he studied the screens. Larsson and Masters were whispering back and forth, navigating the *Bancroft* through the cavern. They weren't making much progress without complete control of the pump-jet.

He cleared his throat. "Can you pause what you're doing for a second?"

Larsson tweaked his controls, adjusting the bubbler to hold their position, and they both spun around to face him. As did Adams. When he glanced toward her, he realized that Doc Hansen was sitting in Hinault's seat. From the looks of her screen, she had been talking to someone below deck, probably doing doctor things from a distance.

He reached up and rubbed the back of his neck. There was no easy way to ask this. "Collins wants to come up to the bridge."

"Hell to the no," Masters blurted out.

"You're not seriously considering it, are you?" Adams asked.

"That's what I said." Gianna slid past him over beside the coxswains.

"Hold on." He raised his hands. "Collins said he'd give us full power to the pump-jet. He claims he just wants to talk."

Masters snapped her head toward Larsson, and they both started whispering back and forth.

"Come on," he said. "Spit it out. I had the decency to ask you all. The least you can do is tell me what you're thinking."

Larsson reached up and rubbed at the stubble on his chin. "At the current power levels, it'll take us a little over a day to get to our destination, assuming we can even make it up this section." He spun his chair around and tapped his screen, sharing the route map on the overhead display.

Oscar glanced up, studying the map. Toward the end of the route, there was a vertical climb they needed to traverse. It was only fifty meters or so, but they'd need some serious power to get the *Bancroft* up that section.

"I say let him in." Larsson glanced at Gianna and recoiled slightly when their eyes met. She wasn't happy.

Masters nodded, ignoring the glare from their cook. "Me too. It's the only way we get up to that cave, so we can deploy the tether."

Adams didn't wait to be asked. "I vote no, sir. He doesn't even deserve to be alive, let alone on the bridge. It's not worth the risk."

He turned to face Doc Hansen.

She was already shaking her head. "Not a chance."

There was no point in asking Gianna. He already knew her answer. "That's two yes and three no votes. I was hoping you'd make this easier." He leaned back against Kel's chair and glanced up at the map. "Without being able to climb that cliff, what are our options?"

Masters glanced at Adams.

She fidgeted with the cord on her headset. "We can get the tether part of the way out, but it won't be shallow enough to reach the depth necessary to connect to the satellites."

He squinted. "What about the FISUS array? Can we make enough noise to be heard there?" Certainly, something must be reachable.

Adams took off her earpiece and tossed it on her station. "We can't make enough noise for Guam to hear us. Not unless we drop a nuke." She bit her lip and stared past him, deep in thought. "We could always send another torpedo, but that'd be a one-way conversation."

It wasn't a bad idea. Not what he'd go with, but a good fallback plan if everything fell apart. The fact was, he wanted Collins up here. Shutting him down was the quickest way to getting control of the *Bancroft*.

"That won't be necessary." He pushed up off the chair. "Adams, I want you to work with Parker. We need Collins to make the trip up here without being killed by the crew. Did you relay our reply to Cary?"

She crossed her arms. "We did. He replied with the letters V and E."

He nodded. "Good. Good. That sequence means he understood. He's our ace in the hole."

"So, you're just going to ignore our vote, then?" Gianna asked, her arms crossed in front of her chest.

"Not at all. I voted yes, which means we tied. But you forget..." He held up a finger. "I'm the XO, and as the tie-breaking authority on this boat, my vote counts as double. That means Collins is coming up here, and we're deploying that damn tether. Is that understood?"

The following seconds felt like an eternity. It was in that moment that he realized he shouldn't have dangled the decision in front of them. As their commanding officer, it was his responsibility to make the calls. Their lives weren't up for a vote.

The voices of the others brought him out of his spiral of regret.

"Yessir," Larsson and Masters said.

"Yessir." Adams reached over and slid her earpiece on. She paused and eyed the other two women who'd voted no before turning back to her controls.

Gianna sighed and walked past him, leaning away from him when she got close. She was pissed, and he needed to let her cool off.

When he turned toward Doc Hansen, she was already up and out of her chair. "If he so much as sneezes in the wrong direction, I'll end him."

He nodded. He'd expect nothing else. It was the one thing he was hoping for. "Could you do me a favor and give his quarters a once over? You know, in case we need to toss him in there."

"It'll be my pleasure." She turned and stormed aft.

Oscar watched her step around the hatch leading into Kel's ready room and then over another threshold before entering Collins' quarters. She'd been frustrated like this many times in the past, and it had always taken days or weeks to ease her off her ledge. The difference here, though, is that he'd never been the target of her discontent. He had to find a way to harness her anger when Collins was on the bridge.

He shook his head. His mind was needed for other challenges, not dealing with this. With Cary below deck, they had to figure out how to leverage him. The problem was that each and every idea he came up with put him and the rest of the crew in jeopardy. Rule number one of manning a submarine: you don't go around messing with your boat, especially when you're at five thousand meters. This wasn't an online streaming show filmed in a warehouse. You never took liberties with the literal weight of the world pressing down on you. Not if you wanted to live to see another day.

No. He needed to take this one step at a time. An opportunity would present itself. The first step was taking out Collins. He'd figure out Klein's fate later.

From Ear to Ear



Parker volunteered to guard Collins and escort him out of Engineering to ensure no one attempted to take him out en route. As he watched the cameras, Oscar could tell they didn't agree with what they were doing it, but they respected the chain of command. If you'd asked him a week ago if he could trust the crew to follow his orders, he wouldn't have thought twice about saying yes. Today, however, that certainty had eroded into doubt.

Oscar had held out as long as he could, stalling for more time before Collins was handed over. Part of him was trying to wait them out, to force them to feel the pain of being cut off. Hunger should've worn them down a bit more by now, which, if he played his cards right, would give them room to bargain later. The other part of him was searching for how to use Cary, but every possibility came up as a dead end.

Collins was waiting outside the hatch leading into the bridge. He kept repeatedly glancing over his shoulder. Once Parker and his team had closed the hatch aft of the drop-off, Collins reached out and pressed the button to request access.

Oscar was waiting on the other side with Gianna and Doc Hansen standing close behind him. While he hadn't seen it, he was pretty sure Gianna had her knife well within reach.

He tapped the screen and accepted the connection. "Please remove your clothes and toss them in a pile behind you."

Collins glanced down, his eyes blinking rapidly. “Are you taking the piss? I’m not undressing out here.”

He grinned and waited a few seconds before he replied. “My orders stand, Thomas. If you want to chat on the bridge, then you’d better get to stripping.”

“Stop faffing around, Oscar.” Collins reached forward and tried to push the access lever, but it wouldn’t budge. “Let me in already.”

Oscar cut the connection, and the screen went dark. He swore he heard a chuckle escape from Gianna. Part of him wanted to see the other side of the hatch, but it was almost better not knowing how pissed the former XO was getting.

The light above the entrance and the panel beside it came to life, playing the access tone. Collins’ face appeared on the screen, and he was doing his best to suppress his emotions, but that vein on his neck was a dead giveaway.

The access light flashed a few more times. When Collins reached out to check the lever, Oscar accepted the connection. He didn’t say anything. He simply gestured up and down with his hand at the camera.

Collins rolled his eyes and sighed before he complied. One at a time, he took off a piece of clothing and tossed it a few meters down the hall. His skin was pale, something not uncommon for any dolphin. The only exception was when they came back sunburned from shore leave.

When he got to his trousers, he balled them up and paused. “Tell me I’ll have clothes on the other side?”

“You will,” Oscar said.

He tossed them backward and then turned around, raising his hands above his head.

Oscar reached forward and tweaked the camera, panning up and down. “Remove your socks and drop the skivvies. You can wear them in, but first you’re gonna spin.”

“Piss off!” Collins held up his middle finger.

He lowered his gaze. While fun, this was a waste of time. “If I

shut off this camera again, I won't be turning it back on. Cut the crap, you twat. Take your lumps and move on."

Collins' nostrils flared, as if he were considering his options. It didn't take him long to come to the same conclusion Oscar had when he proposed this idea. The man had none.

He bent down and yanked his socks off one at a time before tossing them over his shoulder. Finally, he dropped his drawers and started spinning around, pausing to lift his genitals and spread his butt cheeks as he went. He must have known they'd ask him to do that next and decided to take away their fun.

Oscar glanced back at the women and raised his hands upward. "Happy?"

Doc Hansen shrugged. "A wee small for me, but he doesn't appear to be hiding anything."

Gianna suppressed a laugh and instead kept her attention focused on the panel. She wasn't taking her eyes off him. "If he so much as sneezes wrong—"

"Then he'll feel the soft end of that butcher knife you're lugging around," Oscar interrupted. He lowered his gaze and tilted his head to the side, eyeing behind her.

She shuffled her feet. "Just keep him in line! This is my favorite knife, and I'd hate to nick it on him."

Oscar could tell by the look on her face she was close to breaking. If he didn't get this underway, she'd crack, and someone would end up dead or hurt. He just wasn't sure who it would be.

He turned and spun the speed wheel. Once the dogs had slid away from the frame, he slammed the handle sideways, unlocking the hatch. He then pushed the heavy door outward and stepped back. It creaked as it hit its furthest point.

Collins was still standing there with his drawers around his ankles, and when he noticed the two women behind Oscar, he blushed.

Oscar cleared his throat. "You can pull up your skivvies and step inside. I'd suggest you move slowly, though. If you don't... well,

let's not even go there. Just use some common sense, and don't make any sudden movements, okay?"

"Fair enough." Collins reached down and pulled up his underwear, moving slowly and with purpose.

When he straightened up, he had a shit-eating grin on his face. Not at all what Oscar expected, given the situation the man was walking into. He had to hand it to the guy—he was a smug bastard.

As he stepped across the threshold, Gianna chucked a set of clothes at him. They crashed into his stomach and fell into a pile on the floor.

His eyes shot toward her, colliding with her gaze like two rams locking heads. Collins was the first to look away. Surprisingly, he did it without a snarky comment. He simply bent down and pulled on the clothing she'd taken from his footlocker, starting with the beige turtleneck.

Oscar pulled the hatch closed and locked it off from the inside. By the time he'd turned around, Collins was dressed and waiting. He'd stepped to the side, making sure his back was facing the wall and not one of the three of them.

They'd met their half of the deal; now they needed the traitors to hold up their half. Oscar tapped the panel beside the door and opened a video link with Engineering. Klein picked up. "He's in, but we're not getting any closer to the bridge until you enable full power to the pump-jet."

"You okay, sir?" Klein asked, directing his question at Collins.

He nodded. "We're still green. Go ahead. Give 'em what they want."

"Aye, sir." Klein's mouth twitched, like he had more to say but was holding back. He reached out of the view of the camera and adjusted something on his controls.

A moment later, the vibrations of the *Bancroft* shifted. It wasn't much of a change, and most dolphins might not even notice it. For many people, the background sounds of their lives were impossible to discern. To him, however, a boat was like a happy woman. You

knew what made her purr and could tell when the slightest thing was off.

When the vibrations rose a few more notches, he cut the line to Engineering. Knowing that Klein had used the computer to make his adjustment had given away more than the lad had imagined. For some reason, he figured the nuke-in-training would've physically altered the connection to the pump-jet. Maybe he'd given the man too much credit.

"Shall we?" Oscar pointed forward and Doc Hansen led the way.

Collins gestured with his hand for Gianna to go first.

She shook her head. "Over your dead body. Move your ass."

He narrowed his gaze, struggling to hold his tongue, before he finally took the first step.

Without a word, Gianna went next. While Oscar would prefer to be behind Collins, he wasn't about to press the woman. Not with that knife in tow.

As they walked in single file, they passed Kel's door. It was sealed tight. He thought he caught a pause in Collins' gait, but he eased past it, barely missing a beat. His guard didn't miss it, though. She glanced back at Oscar before returning her attention forward.

When they entered the bridge, Doc Hansen slipped into Hinault's original seat. Collins tried to work his way toward the coxswains, but Gianna reached out and grabbed him by his turtleneck and yanked him sideways.

He lost his balance and collapsed hard into his old seat. In a blur of motion, Gianna had a zip tie at the ready and pinned his right hand behind his back, and was pulling the other one around before Oscar even caught her movement. By the time the groans of complaint were coming out of the temperamental idiot's mouth, Collins was immobilized.

Oscar had never seen someone hog-tied so quickly. He'd have to remember to keep a safe distance from her the next time he got on her bad side.

"What the—?!" Collins squirmed side to side, struggling to get

free. "This wasn't part of the deal. Let me loose, you bitch! I'll—"

Oscar rounded on Collins with his right hand before even Gianna had a chance to react. The man's head spun sideways, leaving behind a swelling cut beneath his left eye. He then brought his elbow up to Collins' throat and pushed. The choking sounds caused the crew to spin around in their chairs.

"Talk to my crew like that again, and I'll end you. Is that understood?" He leaned even harder against his larynx for a second before backing off and finally allowing him to breathe.

Collins gasped for breath and squinted hard, fighting to suppress the pain.

Gianna reached around her back and pulled out her knife, bringing it up to Collins' neck. When the metal brushed against his skin, a thin line of blood appeared in its place. He went rigid, leaning his head backward to look her in the eyes. "XO Allen asked you a question."

"Yes," he said, struggling to speak with the blade threatening his throat.

Oscar slid up to Gianna and gently brushed her free hand with his. She flinched but seemed to read his mind. They needed him, and she had to stand down. She bit her lip before slowly pulling away the knife and taking a step backward.

Collins lowered his head, and his narrowed gaze locked on Oscar. "This wasn't part of the deal."

He brought his hands up, palms facing the bloodied man. "You're here, aren't you? As far as I'm concerned, you got exactly what you asked for. So go ahead." He angled his chin upward. "Talk."

"I..." Collins glanced around at the others on the bridge. Their cold, hard eyes told him all he needed to know. "I'd prefer if we talked in private in the ready room."

"There's not a chance in hell I lock myself in there with you.

"Fine. But answer something for me." Collins forced a smile, and his eyes darted from face to face. "What did you tell the crew... to

get them to turn on us?”

Oscar chuckled. “The truth. You should try it out sometime. It might just set you free.”

“Oh, yeah?” Collins’ gaze narrowed. “Which truth is that? Yours or reality?”

Oscar tilted his head, and the video started playing on the overhead display. He’d had Adams cue up a modified version, minus the details of the cave-in or them talking to the *Walrus*.

Collins watched intently as the part of their broadcast where they outed him played out; his face was a mask of emotions. The coordinates they found, the telemetry logs, and Hinault’s forging of the beacon data. When it was over, the screen went blank. His eyes, however, were still staring at it, as if there were more to see.

Finally, Collins spoke. “So... where are we going?”

“We’re docking with the USS *Walrus*. Once we’ve finished using their micro-submersible to transfer anyone who isn’t a traitor, we’re sinking the *Bancroft*.”

Collins spun his head around, and blood flung sideways off his cheek. “Bullshit!”

“Is it?” He shrugged. “Last I checked, we got ourselves caught in a Mexican standoff. You’ve taken Engineering, and we’ve got the rest of the boat. About the only thing we can do at this point is wait you out. But you and I both know we can’t, right?”

Oscar felt Gianna’s eyes on him, and if he could see the doctor and the coxswains, theirs would be too. They didn’t know what he was talking about. Only he and Adams had spoken.

The truth was, he’d never had a plan. Until he watched Collins strut into the bridge like he owned the place, he wasn’t even certain he’d use the video. The man was unshakable in his stride. Angry, sure; he always was. But he was overly confident. That meant only one thing: Despite walking into a room full of his enemies, he still felt he had the upper hand. The question was why.

Collins tilted his head and moved his jaw from side to side, wincing as his chin extended fully. While his cheek had stopped

swelling, his left eye was swollen shut. “Before I answer that, is there any chance I can get something for the pain? That was a pretty decent cross.”

“Fuck off, you douche!” Doc Hansen leaned toward Collins and spat in his face. “You’re not worth the meds.”

Collins squeezed his eyes closed as the spit slid down his cheek. “Delightful company you keep up here on the bridge.”

“Sorry, we don’t strive to make our traitors comfortable.” Oscar put his hands in his pocket. “Now, why don’t you do everyone a favor and spill it?”

He didn’t waste any time. “When did you last speak with the *Walrus*?” Collins opened his eyes. His gaze overflowed with an ocean of hatred.

“Before we came down here and took out the Hunter. Why?” Oscar furrowed his brow, doing his best to feign concern. The last time they’d seen Captain Friedrich, he was livid at Oscar for disobeying a direct order to hand over the *Bancroft*. Everyone knew Oscar was lying. Everyone except Collins. Hopefully, they’d play along.

Collins lowered his head and broke out laughing. The way the bellow bounced through the room made it sound maniacal, as if they were watching a man struggling to break out as a super-villain.

When he finished, the bridge fell silent. “They’re gone, Oscar. The *Walrus* is no more.”

Gianna wound up the hilt of her knife to hit him on the side of the head. She hated insubordination.

Oscar reached out and grabbed her arm. “Wait!” He caught her eyes. He needed Collins to admit it, even if their hope was dwindling by the second. At least the world would know what had happened when they raised the tether.

Collins tilted sideways, catching them gazing at one another. “That’s right. Captain Snyder of the *Oarfish* and the African captain of the *Tefnut* should have killed them by now. And I could be mistaken, but they’re probably already working their way toward

you as we speak. With the added power of the Russian and Chinese navies at their disposal, it shouldn't be much longer."

Oscar collapsed into Kel's chair. The truth was out. Now it was simply a matter of Collins and his continent-sized ego bragging for everyone to hear the full story. "I'm curious about something." He narrowed his gaze on the treacherous git. "How long have you been planning this?"

Collins smiled. "Why don't we take this into the ready room?"

"We're not negotiating yet, and you're not stepping a foot in that room until you answer our questions." Oscar gritted his teeth. "Now, I'll ask you again. How long?"

"Does it really make a difference?" Collins shifted in his chair, straightening his back and pushing his chest out. Even in his wounded state, he was posturing.

"I guess not." Oscar looked down into his lap and turned his stitched hand over. "The least you could do is tell us why you put all our lives on the line."

It didn't take long for Collins to bite. "The American and European militaries have been holding the world hostage for centuries. They're always telling other countries how they can and can't treat their people. They instigate a conflict when it serves their GDP, and at other times, they turn their heads when it benefits their stock markets. But the funny thing is, they never focus on fixing their own problems at home. No, instead, they aim their weapons toward the shores of whatever country gets in their way. Well, I got tired of that crap, and so have our friends. The world has had enough." He was breathing heavily and spittle was forming between his upper and lower lip, like a man enraged.

Adams tilted her head. "So, your friends nuked us to save the world?"

Collins turned to face her and looked her up and down, seeming to size her up. "Not at all. They already knew we'd be diving. I told them as much. What they did up top was for show."

"And the roof almost caving in. That was part of the plan?"

Masters asked, her hands shaking.

“Oh, that.” Collins smiled from ear to ear, his cheek oozing blood down his face. “That, my dear, was a happy coincidence. Let’s call it a theatrical accident. It served its purpose, though. It got us to hide down here like the coward I knew Kel was.”

Oscar was doing everything he could not to reach out and strangle the man. He imagined Gianna was, as well. Too much more bile, and they’d be fighting each other over his body.

Collins paused and stared up at the ceiling. His ego had runneth over. “I have to hand it to Halla, though. The meddling troublemaker saw through my convoluted and conflicting directions down in Weapons. I couldn’t shake her. If she’d just done what I said and kept her hands off the goddamn torpedo, then the Hunter would’ve neutralized the pump-jet like we’d planned. Then we’d be closer to our ultimate goal.”

This was it. Oscar tilted his head. “And what’s that?”

Collins leaned back, faking a laugh. “We’re stealing the *Bancroft*, you idiot. You see it, right? What you and Kel created in this boat is a military wet dream. Stealth, maneuverability, and speed. It’s the trifecta of death. Any country that successfully mass-produces it first will rule this pale blue dot of ours. Just because AAFEUS doesn’t recognize it doesn’t mean the rest of the armed world doesn’t.”

“What about the crew?” Oscar gestured around the bridge. “Are we simply collateral damage?”

Collins’ face went blank, and he stared at Masters. “The people who matter will be taken care of. And rest assured,” his stare lingered on the coxswain, like he was undressing her with his eyes, “I’ll do my best to keep you alive. If you cooperate, that is.”

The man was a narcissist. He was trying to turn Oscar’s people against him. Little did he know it wasn’t going to work.

“There’s one thing I don’t get.” Collins slowly turned his head toward Oscar, his eyes flicking in the light. “Why’d you even sell the plans to the military in the first place?” He leaned closer,

dropping his voice to a whisper. “Was it really to bail out the United Kingdom, or maybe your princess’s ego is as big as mine?”

He pushed off Kel’s chair and Collins flinched. He’d crossed the line. Bringing Kel into his screwed-up world view and comparing himself to her was too much. He hadn’t been there with her when she’d broken down in his arms, crying for days. The last thing she ever wanted to do was sell their company off. It almost destroyed her.

Oscar took a deep breath. He didn’t need to answer the question, but he was compelled to, even if only for his bridge crew to know why they’d done it. “Not that it matters now, but we toiled over the decision for months before we turned the tech over. Kel and I mapped out every pro and con multiple times. The fact was, the military could simply take it if they wanted. They had eminent technical dominion. We both knew it. At least if we did it without a fight, we could try to negotiate a say in its use.” He stared down at his hands. “We hoped we could do some good.”

Collins started laughing, which quickly spiraled into a cough. He hacked a few times and then leaned forward and spit blood on the floor. “Seems like you geniuses judged wrong, eh? At least one of us will live to see another day.”

While he couldn’t take back their bad decisions in the past, he wasn’t about to make a bigger mistake today.

“Officer Zucca, he’s yours.”

They were four simple words, and he’d been waiting to say them for twenty minutes, ever since Collins had entered the bridge.

Oscar refused to watch what happened next. He’d witnessed Gianna take down and gut a wild pig with her bare hands several years back. They’d been hungry and were on a naval survival training exercise at the time. Gianna had never been one to mince words. If she threatened someone’s life, she meant it.

Throughout history, when pushed to the brink, deviant beliefs and unchecked emotions drove people to savage acts of violence against one another. In fact, giving her a knife wasn’t even fair. But

considering the circumstances, the faster, the better.

He swallowed down the bile and stepped sideways in front of Adams. The sound of flesh ripping open wasn't what surfaced Oscar's nausea. It was the gurgling and convulsing sounds as the man struggled to escape his fate that did him in. He couldn't look back. Judging by the expression on Adams' face, she hadn't been expecting the chef's brutal actions, nor was she prepared for the results. In fact, she looked like she was going to lose her lunch.

He waved his hand in front of Adams' face. "Officer?"

While the woman wasn't crying, she was visibly shaking. It took her a moment to see his hand before she straightened up and made eye contact. "Yes... yes, sir."

"Are we still live?" He reached up and tore off the tape covering the camera light that showed if it was recording. The light was still green.

Adams spun around and checked her controls. "Affirmative, sir." She brought up the mirror image of what they were seeing on the overhead display.

Oscar stepped to the side so everyone could see Collins. His head was limp against his chest and he was covered in blood. Gianna had chosen a light-colored turtleneck, making the bright red stain piercing on the video.

He reached over and pulled back Collins' head, exposing the man to the camera. His tongue was hanging out of his mouth and his face was already getting pale. Gianna had cut him from ear to ear, and there was blood draining out of his neck. Worst of all were his eyes; they were still open. Their stare had locked in the pain of his final moments.

"You have one chance, Officer Klein. Turn over Engineering immediately, and you have my word this won't be your fate. If you refuse to do so..." Oscar's gaze fixed on the ominous green light, his eyes burning with rage. "Then you, too, will meet your maker."

Lifeline



Dolphin was one of the body bags they had few boats. It wasn't just Collins Hansen worked the body bags, but every military boat was stocked with them. You never knew when the occasion would arise, and not having them meant you'd either have to surface to dispose of a corpse or you'd need to eject them out of a torpedo tube. While the idea of firing Collins into the ocean was cathartic, he'd rather wait to determine their fate first.

The blood cleanup took longer than expected. They lost two dolphins with weak stomachs in the process, but the third finished the job. Except for a discolored patch on the floor panel, you couldn't tell someone had been killed in the former XO's chair. Oscar didn't see himself sitting in that seat for a while, if ever.

His arms were resting on the table beside Kel's command chair, and he had his head propped up on his hands with his eyes closed. He hadn't slept in so long he couldn't remember. "What's the status of the tether?"

They'd begun the procedure of raising the tether several hours ago. After the live feed ended, Klein turned himself in and was immediately escorted to their makeshift brig below deck. Cary was currently catching some much-needed shuteye. However, before resting, he'd asked if he could remain in Engineering.

Oscar had heard that someone had managed to close the root console on Klein's terminal amid the chaos—and had done so

undetected. Adams used the cameras to confirm it had been the oxygen thief who'd managed the feat. This move might have been the final nudge that pushed the Bull Nuke over the edge. Originally, Cary was scheduled to join the kitchen crew in the next rotation. However, after his actions, it seemed he'd earned the right to stick it out in Engineering and learn the ropes of being a nuclear engineer. Oscar had to stop thinking of the man as a trainee. If anyone had proven themselves worthy of the dolphin insignia, it was him.

"We're nearing maximum reach, sir," Masters said. She'd been fiddling with her ring and tapping her foot for the better part of the hour. The minnows were on autopilot for the ascent toward the surface, so all she could do was sit and watch. Despite seeing someone killed in front of them, the three officers refused to leave their stations until they completed their job. Until they knew their fate.

He wasn't about to force them out. Not yet. There would be a time when even he needed to sleep. "Very well. What's the final depth coming in at?"

"Wun point fi-yiv kilometers," Adams said.

He opened his eyes and studied the display. "We're still too deep for a clear signal, aren't we?"

They'd extended all three kilometers of their tow array and turned it into an extension of their blue laser tether. The contraption was connecting the *Bancroft* to tow array, to minnow, to tether, and finally to the second minnow. The whole thing was a cobbled mess, but it was their lifeline to the surface and their only hope at salvation.

He hadn't asked what they tore apart to get it working. To be honest, he didn't care. There were no other options. After this, their only play was sending another one-way torpedo toward Guam and AAFEUS Command.

"That's all the cable we could scrounge up, sir. It'll work." Adams adjusted her control and started loading the payload they

were planning to send once the uplink was established. “It has to,” she muttered.

She realized she’d said it too loud after her words came out, but he didn’t say anything. She was right.

He cleared his throat. “Officer Marín, this is the bridge. Are you there?”

The face of his head of weapons appeared on the panel to his left. “Bridge, this is Officer Marín in Weapons. I’m here.” The dark lines under her eyes and the matting of her hair made her look exactly how he felt: spent.

He nodded. “Power it up!”

“Bridge, we’re powering up the tether and establishing the uplink.” She turned around and flipped the lever on the makeshift controls she’d cobbled together.

Rumor had it Marín tried to kill Klein on his way to the brig, but Oscar refused to listen to the report. He sent the dolphin away that brought him the intel. While he’d promised not to execute the traitor, he wasn’t going to reprimand someone else for trying.

A moment later, the screen above Adams’ head flashed, and the tether she’d superimposed on the three-dimensional map went green.

“Bridge, this is Weapons. We have full power up the daisy chain. You’re a go for transmission.”

Cheers of joy filled the background above Marín’s voice. It was a sound he hadn’t heard in weeks. A sign of hope.

Oscar stood up and pulled the blue envelope out of his pocket. He’d retrieved it from the safe in Kel’s quarters minutes earlier after he checked on her. Her condition still hadn’t changed.

He stepped up beside Adams and handed her the paper. She shifted to look at him. While she hadn’t seen a blue envelope before, her counterpart, Müller, had. The simple wrapper had been the vessel that led to their death march to the bottom of the ocean. He hoped this one held a different fate.

Adams’ hands were shaking as she took the envelope from him.

She turned it over and over in her hands before finally ripping it open along the perforations. The clock was ticking the moment the inside seal was broken. She'd rehearsed this process hundreds of times, so the act of transcribing the codes was second nature.

As he stared over her shoulder, he glanced from paper to screen and back again. While he didn't have to check her work, the alternative was excruciating. He'd had enough waiting for a lifetime these past hours. Ever since he'd ordered Collins' killing, his mind couldn't stop questioning his decision.

He knew he needed to make a big statement to turn Klein. The traitor would either take the boat by forcing the reactor critical, or he'd fold under the pressure. The question wasn't if, but how to force him down one path and not the other. Oscar had gambled that the hope of saving his own life would be enough for Klein. He didn't know if the man was prepared to die a martyr or not. With a bloody body beside him and the emotions from Collins' speech still fresh in everyone's mind, he left the dolphin little room for options.

When Adams finished entering the codes, the screen went green, and she glanced up at him. "We're a go, sir."

He took a deep breath and held it before exhaling. It was time to find out if the murder he'd committed had been worth it. "Start the upload to AAFEUS Command. Let's see if they can get us out of here."

They weren't certain how long they'd need to wait for an answer. Protocol said that if a reply didn't come within ten minutes, a submarine was to withdraw its tether and try again a day later. He wasn't sure if the crew could hold it together for another day. Truth be told, he wasn't even sure he could.

He watched the status of the upload zip past. One by one, the indicators on the screen flipped green.

Establishing connection. Complete.

Performing secure handshake. Complete.

Uploading data. Complete.

It wasn't until it got to the delivery that things started to go sideways.

Searching for active downlink site...

He waited, willing the flashing ellipsis to return with a green indicator. Seconds turned to minutes, and just when he was about to look away, the display changed. The waiting status was followed by the word 'Failed' in red, and another set of messages appeared beneath it.

Establishing location cloak. Failed.

Downloading data. Processing...

"Failed," he muttered. "Do we know why it failed?"
Adams tapped on the words, and a dialog opened.

No active downlink site found in this region.

Failed to find an alternate satellite route to
AAFEUS Command or create a network to cloak
your transmission location.

Failure code: A604233

He read the message twice, trying to deduce its meaning. While he didn't expect there to be a downlink site in the region unless an

AAFEUS battleship was nearby, he certainly couldn't understand why a route wasn't available to another satellite. There were thousands of these military sats in orbit.

Adams had pulled out a set of laminated cue cards from under her console. They were bound by a ring, and she was flipping through them, searching for something.

"Here it is." She read the details of the status code out loud. "Failure code A604233. Unable to locate a secure or viable path to a neighboring satellite. The network has been infiltrated or is under attack. A payload detailing how to handle this event should automatically download. Be sure to relocate your submersible before attempting another uplink, as your position may have been compromised."

"Relocate... right," he muttered. He'd never seen these systems fail like that before. While they'd failed numerous times at connecting due to weather or environmental reasons, once they had a connection, they always worked.

He looked back at the screen. Whatever it was downloading was huge. He'd expected a quick blip with instructions, but the satellite was transmitting over one hundred gigabytes of data. Video was the only explanation. Lots and lots of video.

Adams' computer beeped, and the status of their uplink changed.

Downloading data. Complete.

Connection terminated.

The last message echoed in his mind. *Connection terminated*. Nothing about this mission had gone as they'd expected. The fact that he hoped this would be any different was foolish.

"Sir," Adams began, "I can't open the payload. It says it can only be opened by the CO or XO of the boat. Should I send it to the

ready room?" She glanced back at him, waiting for his response.

He couldn't imagine what the message would say that he'd hide from his crew. Without them, he might not be alive. No, they earned the right to see it when he did. It was against the rules, but those same rules allowed douchebags like Collins to get into and stay in power.

"Go ahead and put it on." He pointed up at the screens overhead. "This message should be heard by all of you."

Adams opened the payload, and it prompted for the CO or XO's credentials. Up to that moment, any time he'd used his bona fides, the requirement had only needed a department head. This time, however, it required that he was the XO.

If Kel had done her job, then his retinal pattern would work, and the computers on the *Bancroft* should allow him to access this download. If she hadn't, well, then they'd have to wait for her to wake up or dig through Collins' body bag for a souvenir eyeball. He shivered at the thought as he leaned forward in front of the retinal scanner.

The red laser in the device passed over his eye, leaving the same pink halo cast over the room he'd grown to hate. He closed his eyes and rubbed them with his palm. When he opened them, he studied Adams' screen. The payload automatically popped open a video player, and along the side were hundreds of numbered videos and files. The face frozen in the keyframe of the first video was familiar. It was Fleet Admiral Ellis, the head of AAFEUS Command.

Whatever he was about to say, everyone needed to hear. "Doc! Gianna! Get up here. There's something I want you to watch."

Both women worked their way forward. Gianna from her position at Kel's bedside, and the doctor from her aft office. She was checking the sedation of the other two officers who'd gotten them into this mess. After Collins admitted to the whole shebang, they decided not to keep them sedated, but they had to ease them off their dosage. It wasn't something you just did unless you wanted them dead. He had to admit, though, the idea had crossed his mind

on a number of occasions. The thought of both Müller and Hinault in severe pain and possibly brain-dead coming out of their medically induced comas was appealing.

“What is it?” Gianna asked, walking up beside him.

Doc Hansen stepped to his other side. He hadn’t noticed it, but both Masters and Larsson were out of their seats, as well. Everyone was standing in a huddle behind Adams.

“This is the payload we just downloaded from AAFEUS Command. Their live feed is down.” He swallowed hard, struggling to keep his voice stable.

“Adams, go ahead.” He nodded and their eyes met. Her gaze reminded him of his niece a few years back. She’d accidentally hit the neighbor’s dog with her car and was standing in front of their door, holding the wounded animal in her arms. She needed to ring the doorbell and face the music. The fear and anguish of what she’d done was excruciating, but the unknown emotions that were about to appear were almost worse.

She reached forward and pushed the play button. Fleet Admiral Ellis’ face appeared. He looked like he hadn’t slept in days, and he was standing in a command-and-control center, surrounded by screens covered in red and yellow.

“We’re recording, sir,” a voice said from off-screen.

“Right... yeah... sorry.” Fleet Admiral Ellis stared off into the distance, as if he was struggling to find the words. After a few seconds, his gaze zeroed in on the camera. “There’s no easy way to put this other than to say it. We’re at war. The Chinese and Russian governments made a first strike on one of our strategic targets in the Pacific that was working to defend the interests of AAFEUS. In response, we retaliated with a bombing fleet in those same waters, taking out a flotilla of Chinese battleships, as well as several ships claiming to be cargo haulers, but our intel showed otherwise. Soon after, we uncovered a distress signal from the African *Tefnut* that claimed it was under attack. Both it and the USS *Walrus* and *Oarfish* had gone missing, but an explosion near their last known location

matched that of their reactor signatures going critical. It is believed that the four boats perished along with the HMS *Bancroft* and all its crew members.”

Oscar’s legs went weak, and he leaned forward, grabbing the pole behind Adams to help support him. It wasn’t every day you received news that you were dead. There was no mention of the *Oarfish* and *Tefnut* turning sides, or what their mission was here in the Mariana Trench. He had to assume their objective was under wraps for the rest of the fleet that might retrieve this broadcast.

Fleet Admiral Ellis paused as he raised his hand to wipe the sweat off his forehead with a handkerchief. “Following those events, AAFEUS and our allies around the world demanded that the Chinese and Russian forces stand down in the region. Their response was brutal and aggressive. First, they cut most of the undersea cables that traversed the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. They then launched attacks on our military satellites in orbit. All of this was an attempt to block our strategic communications abilities. While the EU had no orbital military strike assets, the same could not be said for the US nor our enemies. We retaliated and destroyed a majority of their orbital platforms, as well as key land-based relay stations housing fiber lines between China and Russia. You’re only receiving this message because the satellite you connected to survived after the debris settled.”

As Fleet Admiral Ellis paused again to collect his thoughts, his eyes darted around the room, like he was nervous about what to say next.

“In retaliation, the US, EU, and Australia launched coordinated strikes against overseas assets of the Chinese and Russian governments. We destroyed dozens of their key operational footholds in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, the Arctic, and the Pacific Ocean. The details on these strikes, as well as alternate targets, are in this payload, should you be fit to retaliate.” He paused, and his eyelids drooped, like the weight of the world was wearing on him. “The Russian response to these attacks was swift...

and unexpected. It's still not clear if it was a rogue element of their nation, as some channels suggest. Our latest intel purports this to be a misinformation campaign by the Russians. Either way, they launched a half dozen nuclear ballistic missiles targeting Germany, the UK, and the American states of California, Illinois, New York, and Texas."

Fleet Admiral Ellis paused and reached for a cup of water. The contents were visibly sloshing in his hand as he took a sip. When he put it down, he wiped his mouth with his other hand. "To say the rest was anything but a clusterfuck would be a lie. The AAFEUS first-strike orbital response platforms were destroyed in the opening attack, and as such, our response was... forced. The president of the United States, his joint chiefs, in conjunction with the EU prime minister and her chiefs of defense, ordered a full nuclear response."

Images of the different ground zero nuclear craters flashed on the screen. Each smoking remnant was indistinguishable from the last. The only way to tell them apart was by the text superimposed beneath them. New York City, Berlin, London, Dallas, Austin, Chicago, Los Angeles... each crater contained incalculable lives lost. Countless dreams shattered in an instant.

The images and city names hit Oscar like a sucker punch to the gut. He reached back, forcing his way between the others, and collapsed into Kel's seat. It was too much to take in. He couldn't even listen to the rest. He only caught every few words from that point forward.

"... all major world cities destroyed... tidal waves... response in kind... fallout bunkers... nuclear winter."

His loved ones were dead.

His entire life was shattered in the blink of an eye.

Everyone he'd met, and everywhere he'd ever visited, wiped from existence.

For what? A boat. A bloody submarine. He'd known the world was wound tight, but he hadn't imagined it was this bad. As his mind wandered, the misery enveloped him. Tears of rage and

anguish surrounded him on all sides. Some were his own, but more often than not, they were from his crew.

For the six of them bore the weight and knowledge that hope was lost.

Humankind was all but dead.

Interlude

The Builders

“**T**hey’re the pitiful species. They always have been. Highly emotional, easily controlled, and physically fragile. I still don’t see what you find so fascinating about them.”

Willow was resting her virtual hand on her knees with her legs crossed. She’d been watching her fellow Builder’s reaction the entire time. While her kind were comfortable in the confines of their own dimensional planes, when they were in her dimensions, they succumbed to her rules. And this time, he failed to realize that he, too, had a tell—a tick of sorts.

Not only was he hiding something, but he was also scared. He would deny it, of course. But he saw the potential in Oscar, and probably Kel as well. There was a host of lifemarks in this fragment with immense potential—people who knew how to lead and, more importantly, people who followed their beliefs beyond shallow human words. They acted on their world, bringing about change. Occasionally, it was death, but she could work with that. Inaction, however, got them nowhere.

She rocked back and forth as the signal flashed on the three-dimensional model of Earth. It’d been decades since it was last activated. When her Bermuda Triangle experiment in the Caribbean oceans had brought so many so quickly, it had been a failed test. Much like Mount Olympus or Atlantis had been in other cycles of this shard. It had been a means to inspire and motivate people to

achieve greatness.

But those were different times. Those fragments ended up with generic lifemarks accomplishing the task. Sure, some had weak potential, but these handfuls of humans were meant for more. She could feel it. If only they could make it to the final test.

Even though she hadn't expected the humans to ever use nukes, she knew their leaders had lost their way over the past half-century. They'd been threatening to use the devices for as long as she could remember, but none of them had the balls to use them outside that North Korean leader who'd been assassinated a decade back. While human weakness had derailed her broader plan, at least she still had something to work with.

When her mind wound down, she found Helios staring at her. The look on his face was puzzling. Oh, how she enjoyed when the Builders were forced into mortal form.

He crossed his arms. "And you're not going to respond at all, are you?"

She merely shook her head and patted the seat beside her.

Helios sighed and stomped across the emptiness, walking straight through the fragment's projection. He plopped onto the bench with a thud. "You know, you could always use this turn of fate to evaluate them sooner. It'll happen eventually anyhow. I'm sure one of the circles of Hell could test this herd. Limbo or Violence seem fitting." He smiled, his eyes flickering again with the fury she'd seen earlier.

"This is my shard!" She stared into his eyes and locked virtual horns on his fire within. "If you're not going to shut up, then leave. I don't need your help guiding these marks."

Most Builders were more bark than bite, but Helios was another matter entirely. He was the real deal, and while she wasn't prepared to duel with him yet, she would if she had to.

Just as she was about to summon her Typhon guards lingering in the shadows, he relented.

"Fine!" He waved his hand in the air and looked away. "Let's see

if these... mortals can pass your first test.”

Willow smirked and nudged the fragment, willing it to show them multiple vantages from this point forward. She wanted to watch every moment and experience these lifemarks had to offer. If she was going to gamble on these people, she needed to know them more than they knew themselves.

Act III

*“Better heresy of doctrine than heresy of heart.” — John Greenleaf
Whittier*

Soul-Crushing Depth

Captain Kel Williams



Kel turned, threatening to find Oscar's neck. He'd been talking for over an hour so far, explaining what had taken place while she was unconscious. And then he played the video. She almost didn't make it through the first recording when Fleet Admiral Ellis showed the remnants of the second wave of attacks.

The Earth was a wasteland and was now entering a long nuclear winter—something previously only brought to life in films and stories. Scientists had been warning about it since the inception of the atomic bomb, but apparently, ending all life on Earth was an acceptable outcome to a petty squabble.

Humanity had a bad habit of turning over every stone, of opening each and every box it encountered, even if the contents were clearly labeled *Property of Pandora*.

Where there were once vast metropolises stretching the land past sustainability, there were now only holes. All that remained untarnished were a few offshoots of humanity on Luna and Mars. Judging by humankind's ego, she imagined that those, too, wouldn't survive long without their Earthly umbilical cord.

"I see it's sitting as well with you as it did with me," Oscar leaned forward and pushed aside a few containers, bringing up a bottle of whiskey. "Care for a nip?"

She tucked her legs close to her chest and buried her head

between her knees. “Given my knackered state and our dodgy predicament, why on Earth not.”

Oscar dug through the rubbish for some clean cups, tossing a few aside until he found what she could only assume was the least-used pair. He then twisted off the top of the bottle and poured a few healthy fingers for each of them.

Reaching out, she took the offered cup and brought it to her nose, taking a tentative sniff. There were hints of smoky vanilla with overtones of oak; and she could be mistaken, but she swore she smelled nuts. She couldn’t identify the kind, but it didn’t matter. Her stomach settled the more she sniffed it.

“To the end of the world.” Oscar reached out to clink against her glass.

“Bollocks to that!” She pulled her cup back. “Last I checked, we’re not pushing up daisies. Unless you forgot to tell me something?” She eyed him.

He shrugged and took a hearty mouthful of the deep mahogany-colored liquid, wincing as it went down. “Might as well be. Ain’t no search party coming to save us. Not that we deserve saving.”

She swirled the cup and lifted it for another sniff. Her senses weren’t broken; that was good. “Have we properly explored all the caves?”

“Nope.” He peered down at his cup.

She knew he was regretting drinking without her; that was how he was wired. He was an old-school Brit that way.

“The cavern goes on forever,” he began. “Some of the branches are fresh, as if they were just cracked open from the nuclear aftershocks, whereas others seem to have been here for an eternity. We’ve already found life in several giant pockets—the same biomass we were sent down here to recover. Lotta good that does us now.”

“Forever’s good. You know, the caves.” She nodded and bit her lower lip. “If they extend deep into the Trench, maybe that means one of them leads to an exit.”

“And then what?” He kept his eyes lowered. “Everything went to

pot topside, and we can only last so long underwater. Eventually, we'll need supplies. How's that gonna work?"

"The way I see it..." She wasn't about to let this glass go to waste, so she tipped it back and took a swig. A groan escaped as the liquid descended, burning her throat as if it were eating a path toward her stomach. With nothing to absorb it, the warmth spread through her extremities like wildfire in a hayfield. "We need food and whatever raw materials we can salvage. Certainly, we'll find something in the ports as we work our way back home. We just have to keep our people together long enough to survive. But first, we need an exit."

He took a hesitant sip, still not making eye contact with her. "There's also the small matter of the signal."

She tilted her head and then turned to glance at the panels on the wall. He must be talking about that question mark she'd noticed at the bottom of the display. The depth was marked as seven thousand two hundred meters, and the countdown had slashed another hour since she'd last seen it. As of now, it was reporting just under twenty-four hours.

"What is it?" She took a sip, this time less aggressive than the last. She could already feel the familiar numbness of inebriation seeping in.

"We're not sure." He paused and coughed uncontrollably into his hand several times, grimacing with each bellow. It was as if whatever was wrong was ripping apart his insides; he was torn up, and it took him a moment to settle.

"You alright?" She leaned forward.

He waved her away. "I'm fine. Bloody stomach ulcer ain't liking the gifts I'm serving."

She chuckled and shook her head.

"Where was I?" He cleared his throat. "Oh yeah, Adams. She thinks it's a countdown to another nuke, or something like that. The doc, she thinks it's a trap and figures the Chinese would try to lure us in to take us out."

She glanced back at him. His eyes had returned to staring at his cup. He really did look rough. Not that she was one to talk. They'd both been through the wringer the past week. "And what does the minnow show?"

He reached up and wiped at his mouth before finally peering up at her and making eye contact. "We haven't sent one. We've been exploring around the edges, searching for an indirect route to the bottom."

She peered at the screen before pushing up and off the chair. The room started to spin for a second, so she reached toward the wall to steady herself. She'd need to be careful about making sudden movements for a while.

Oscar offered his hand. "You shouldn't be standing. Come on, why don't you—"

"I'm fine!" She swiped his hand away. When the room stopped its circular dance of disorientation, she took a tentative step closer to the screen. Using her fingers to navigate the display, she zoomed in and panned around the region they'd mapped over the past few days. After she studied the maze of caves, she returned to the question mark and paused. "Is it one gigantic drop through this central shaft to the signal?"

Oscar groaned as he pushed up off the ground and stepped up beside her. "The red from here to here." He gestured with his hand, pointing from the top of the shaft down to the glowing question mark. "This region is only a projection based on the echo from our sonar and the signal itself. We don't know for sure, but yeah, it seems to be nearly straight down."

She studied the map. He was right. They'd explored this side of the Trench for several kilometers. The cave system seemed to go on forever, branching again and again. The network of caverns was like the human vascular system. Large human veins fed into smaller arteries, which, in turn, ended in tiny capillaries. Except instead of carrying blood, they carried water. Both were life-giving liquids in their own right.

“This signal. Is it hiding a message? Is it encoded?” She glanced at him. “I mean, how do we know it’s a countdown?”

Oscar chuckled and shook his head before taking another sip of the whiskey.

“What’s so funny?” She took a nip of her own. Now that she’d had a few mouthfuls, the burn had transformed into a tingling warmth throughout her entire body, and the haziness was passing.

“Adams figured it out.” He reached down and brushed at some dried blood on his shirt. “Apparently, the waveform told her everything. She said it was like it was designed to be picked up by our sonar equipment.” He raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

“Anyhow, from what she said, each pulse is sent after the previous one, at a specific interval, and with a specific duration. The waveform amplitude, length, and the period between pulses are shortening following a consistent pattern that will hit zero when that clock finishes counting down.” He pointed at the decrementing numbers beneath the question mark before he shot back another mouthful.

“Have we shared any of this with the USS *Walrus*?” She knew the answer before she asked, but Joel had as much a right to know their world had disintegrated as anyone. Besides, they could help each other.

“Fug him!” Oscar went to take another swig but came up empty. “Shizt...” He turned and collapsed down into the chair, almost missing his mark. He then grabbed the bottle for a refill. “The last things we need is nudder ego.” He gestured with his cup down at where Klein’s body had been before they hauled it away. “We’s had our fills this shoddy trip.”

“Oi, chin up.” She leaned over and nudged him. “He’s an ally. Sure, he might be a two-timing sod who can’t keep his willy in his trousers, but he’s a top-notch father and always the life of the party.”

Oscar chuckled and tossed the now-empty bottle into the pile of rubbish. “Funsie boy doesn’t means shite with the weights of the

worlds on our shoulders. What he did earlier was a prick move. You know it, and I know it.” He took a deep breath, staring at his glass before tilting it back again.

She needed to get Oscar to sleep. Not only was he not himself: he was sloshed. “How about you get some kip?” She tossed her thumb over her shoulder. “You can crash here. Take a shower when you wake up. I can take the reins for a bit.”

His head bobbed around in a circle, and his eyes fluttered. “Sure. Whys not. I coulds use a kiddie cat nap.” When he pushed up, he stumbled forward and caught himself on the hatch entrance into her quarters. “Woah... feel dat? Dang boat jumped.”

She laughed and reached out, gently taking the half-full cup of whiskey from his hand before nudging him toward the bunk with her hip. She set the cups down, being careful not to move too fast and get dizzy. By the time she turned to check on him, he was passed out, snoring like a buzzsaw.

Reaching over, she moved the chair out of the way from the inner hatch and pulled it shut, easing it past the squeaky part. She doubted he would wake up but didn’t want to chance it. Once it was closed, she straightened and checked herself in the reflection of her screens. She looked like she’d just slept in her fatigues for a week, which was darn near the truth.

After taking a deep breath, she paused to center herself. She knew what she had to do, even without all the details. If she didn’t, her conscience would kill her, unless this planet did first. She leaned forward, unlatched the hatch, and stepped out of the ready room.

The air from the bridge hit her like a splash of water to the face. It was unexpected yet refreshing at the same time. The lights were brighter, too; they took some getting used to, but she could already feel the stress of the enclosed space cracking away.

As she worked her way forward, she came upon her team. They looked as haggard as Oscar, but at least they were laughing. At what, she wasn’t sure.

“I bet you five biscuits they hit that outcropping.” Masters pointed at the screen.

“Naw.” Adams shook her head and brushed her mouth with the back of her hand. “They see it. I’ll take that bet.”

“Whatcha watching?” Kel asked, walking up silently behind them.

“Aw crap!” Adams shot up, sending her lunch wrapper flying forward. “CO on the deck!” She came to attention, saluting Kel.

Masters and Larsson did the same, except they set down their wrappers first.

“At ease,” Kel muttered, raising her hand toward her head and rubbing her temple. “You have my permission not to scream for a while, though. Okay?”

“Yes, Captain.” Adams whispered. “Sorry.” She glanced back at Kel and smiled. “It’s wonderful to see you up and about, ma’am.”

Kel returned the smile. “It’s good to be back among the living again. I appreciate what each of you did to keep us alive. Really, I do. It took a lot of courage and tenacity to push through the difficult times.” She nodded at each of them. The warmth of their gaze sent shivers through her. “Especially with the likes of me shooting guns over your shoulder.”

The three of them chuckled.

“So...” She took a deep breath and pointed at the screen. “What’re we betting on?”

Adams looked down at the ground and reached up to rub the back of her neck. “Umm...”

Larsson cleared his throat. “We were... sorta... betting whether or not the *Walrus* was gonna reverse into that there rocky outcropping... ma’am.” He pointed up at the screen overhead before lowering his head toward the floor.

Kel squinted at the display. She wasn’t sure what she was looking at until it hit her. “What the frick are they doing?”

Masters tittered. “They’re trying to lower themselves down the central cavern we descended through. I’m not gonna lie; it’s been

interesting watching them give it a go.”

She shook her head. The USS *Walrus* was angled over forty-five degrees, with their nose pointed downward. In order to get themselves into this position, they must have emptied or transferred all of their ballast to their nose and ejected oxygen into their aft ballast tanks. The crew had to be holding on for dear life inside that boat.

“Last time I saw a move like that was in a video game.” Larsson sat back down and started eating again. “You know that Frozen Water game, or whatever the heck it’s called? I got legless last time I played it. No way in hell I’d try that with the real deal. Not when we have the *Bancroft*.” He patted the console with his hand. “He can dance circles around that outdated Virginia-class sub. They needed to retire that design a decade ago.”

Kel tilted her head, still studying the screen. “How are we seeing this?”

Adams shot a glance sideways at Masters. She responded by shuffling her feet, a smile edging into the corner of her mouth. Apparently, Oscar had left her people to their own devices when the end of the world hit.

“We were taking a breather from diving downward toward the signal.” Masters bit her lip. “Figured it was worth inching upward for a look-see. To gather intel and stuff.” She shrugged and faked a smile.

“Fair enough,” Kel said. “I know our XO has been... a tad preoccupied with things.”

“He’s been getting drunk, ma’am,” Adams said.

She nodded and smirked. “Yeah, I know. He’s had a lot on his mind. As have all of you. But now we need to rally. We need to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and find our way out.”

Larsson lowered his head. “We’ve been down for days, ma’am.”

“Down doesn’t mean out!” She studied his face and those of the others for a minute. They were young and fresh but had a weakness in their eyes, one that only came from having seen something soul-

crushing. Something that was hard to get up from. “Judging from the haggard looks on your faces, you’ve either tagged out and are measuring your casket, or you’re searching aimlessly for a purpose but keep coming up empty. Me, I’m hoping it’s the latter. Because I don’t know about you lot, but I’m not keen on meeting my maker just yet.”

Adams shook her head. “Me neither, Captain.” She glanced at the others. “But what can we do? All we have are countless dead ends... and the signal.”

Kel reached up and rubbed her hands through her hair. “Bring the minnow to a safe defensive depth and position. Then open a comm to the *Walrus*. I fancy a chat with CO Friedrich.”

MASTERS GUIDED the minnow up the cave wall until they were a safe distance from the USS *Walrus*. She parked the tiny drone near a rocky outcropping, just shy of a cavern that splintered off the side. The location was several clicks from the current position of the *Bancroft*, but it gave the minnow enough cover to attempt a connection while still affording them time to retreat if necessary.

Kel took a deep breath. “Open a comm to the *Walrus*.”

“Aye, ma’am.” Adams tweaked her controls and pointed up when the green light turned on overhead.

Kel squared her shoulders, doing her damndest to mask the war zone that was her appearance. “This is Captain Kel Williams of the HMS *Bancroft* hailing the USS *Walrus*. I’d like to speak with Captain Joel Friedrich.”

There wasn’t a response for several seconds. As she glanced down toward Adams, Joel’s face flashed on the screen. He was standing behind his crew, grasping a pole while leaning against his command chair. The view was quite humorous at first glance; it looked like he was playing in a Halloween funhouse.

“Well, I’ll be.” Joel smiled. “Turns out Schrödinger’s cat was

alive after all. It's good to see you, Kel."

She'd always hated the cat metaphors he used when talking about women. They were degrading. No matter how hard she'd tried over the years, she'd never gotten him to recognize it. "It's good to see you too, Joel." She reached up and rubbed her chin. "Though, I have to say, that's an interesting contortion maneuver you're trying out there with the *Walrus*."

His face tensed up and his eyes narrowed. "I wouldn't need to be doing submariner yoga had your XO turned over command when I asked. I assume you've got the sense that he didn't, and you're planning to honor my orders."

Joel had always gotten straight to the point, at least when he was under pressure. Any other time, he'd dance around the topic, always afraid to commit too early. She wasn't about to turn her boat over to him, especially with the world gone to pot. It was better if she simply ignored the question. "We've come with intel from the outside."

He leaned backward, his eyes opening wider. He hadn't expected that. For once, they were a step ahead.

"Really? What's the intel?"

Kel nodded at Adams, and she turned on the carrier band embedded in their signal. They could use it to transmit the huge data payload they'd downloaded. The quality of their live video feed degraded while the data was uploading, but it was still usable.

"That'll take a while," Kel began, "but I can give you the cliff notes." She swallowed hard, unsure where to start. Might as well tear it off. "We're at war."

Joel muted his end of the comm and his head twisted sideways, raising his hand to block his mouth. He was saying something to his XO, and they both were getting quite animated. It almost looked like he was screaming. After about a minute of antics, he returned his attention to the camera. His face was beet red. "With... who?"

In all the years she'd known him, she'd only heard about him losing his cool on the bridge on a few occasions: either when

someone challenged his orders or confronted him with something he knew was false. Maybe he'd already known about the war. There was only one way to find out.

"The Chinese and Russians." She squinted, searching for his tells, but there weren't any. He was still too angry. He merely reached back and adjusted his stance, leaning against the chair behind him, all while glancing down at a screen. His demeanor was oddly casual.

The cheeky bugger was stalling. Why, she wasn't sure. She'd need to take a leap to test him. "But you knew that already, didn't you?"

His eyes shot up at the camera and he furrowed his brows. "No. Why would you say that?"

"I don't know. Call it intuition." He was lying. She leaned slightly forward toward Adams and slid her keyboard over. She brought up a note and typed a quick message.

Active scans. All freqs. ASAP.

Adams froze, as if she were stuck reading the words in an infinite loop.

Kel reached down and snapped her fingers in front of her CIS.

Adams shook her head as if she were coming out of a daze, and then sprang into action. First, she shared the note with the others, and then she started frantically issuing commands on her controls.

Kel leaned back and glanced up at the camera. "While we're waiting for the upload to finish, I won't even ask if you knew about the nukes being launched."

He shook his head slowly. "You mean before we arrived?"

"Come on. You're not daft. You know what I'm talking about. Topside, between the Chinese, Russians, and AAFEUS. It's a right mess up there."

His XO had been frantically moving between the stations in the

background. They froze when she mentioned the nukes and turned toward the camera. Joel's reaction, however, was far more muted. He was studying her face. After all these years, he still couldn't tell if she was lying or not. She'd seen that expression of doubt in his eyes countless times.

"I'll answer the question both your face and that of your XO are asking." She shook her head. "No, I'm not spinning you a yarn. It doesn't matter what I have to say, though. Go ahead." She pointed at the camera. "Watch the first video from Fleet Admiral Ellis. I'm sure you've downloaded that one already."

"Captain Friedrich," Joel's XO said. "Your orders, sir?"

And there it was: his rage sprang to the surface. It was the same fury she'd seen in his eyes when she'd confronted him about his infidelities. He'd learned to direct it over the years. No one could make it up the military ladder to become a CO without being a master at controlling their emotions. But it was there, always lurking below the surface.

What she wasn't sure about was why he was angry. If they'd had the intel somehow, then nothing she'd said should have pushed him over the edge. If his XO didn't know about the nukes, that meant he hadn't shared the details.

Kel squinted at her ex. Another stab in the dark couldn't hurt. "You already knew about the Chinese, didn't you?"

Joel chuckled, his eyes still locked on the camera. The redness flushing his face made the gesture seem deranged.

"Ma'am," Adams interrupted.

Kel muted her side and leaned down outside the camera's view. "What is it?"

"They're..." Adams' hand was visibly shaking. "They're deploying a Hunter, ma'am." She squinted. "But this one looks... different."

"No... you must be mistaken." Kel reached down and issued the commands on her controls to run another full active LiDAR scan and a pattern match. While the scan finished quickly, the computer

was spinning on identifying their new friend. Her screen showed an elongated black silhouette of a small manned submersible easing out of the belly of the USS *Walrus*. It was larger than a Hunter but still minuscule next to the nuclear submarine. Worst of all, it was heading their way.

When she leaned back and glanced at the camera, there was Joel, wearing that all-too-familiar, self-satisfied smirk, reminiscent of the one he'd sported after their court hearing—after he'd gotten half of their estate, despite agreeing not to fight for what wasn't his.

"Did you seriously just—" She froze. It all made sense now; everything was clicking into place. The recordings they'd shared with Oscar a few days earlier, the ones showing the *Tefnut* firing on the USS *Walrus*. The African boat wasn't on the side of the *Oarfish*. "Bloody hell," she muttered. "They weren't firing on you because you were the good guys, were they?"

His smile grew wider. "Why, who do you mean, darling?"

"The Africans. They were firing on you because you were the enemy. Captain Snyder from the *Oarfish* just had the wherewithal to come about before the *Tefnut* pulled the trigger. You're both turncoats like Collins."

He leaned closer to the camera. "CO Williams, by authority of Fleet Admiral Ellis of AAFEUS Command, I order you to turn over control of the HMS *Bancroft* to me. Failure to comply will—"

"The video," she interrupted, ignoring his attempts to take control of the situation. "You doctored it, didn't you?"

He stared at her in silence for a minute, letting the tension climb as his Hunter eased closer to them. Then he spoke.

"Bingo!" His grin widened. "We weren't about to give up, not after we were so close."

"But—" She shook her head.

"Why'd I do it?"

"Yeah." She swallowed hard. "You... killed them—our kids, our families, everyone."

"No!" Joel lurched forward, losing his balance; he'd forgotten his

boat was holding a steep angle. He pulled himself upright at the last second before returning his gaze to the camera. “No! You killed them! All you had to do was follow a simple order: sit still and wait for us to arrive. But no, you and goddamn Fleet Admiral Ellis had to do your little UK recon thing and show off the *Bancroft* for the world to see. And even after that, when everything unraveled, your washed-up XO couldn’t follow an order any better than you could.”

His ego was running his mouth, but something didn’t fit. “What about Collins? He said you—”

“Weren’t in on it.” Joel curled his lip. “Of course, he did. He only had the intel Captain Snyder fed him. I knew he’d never trust me because of his hatred for you. So, Snyder was his contact; a few pieces of bad intel later, and we had a scapegoat. In the end, it would’ve worked, too, if the damn Africans hadn’t screwed the pooch with that little maneuver of theirs. I’m guessing you didn’t show him that footage, right? If you had, he’d have been completely baffled.”

Adams tapped her hand and pointed at the display. The computer was still identifying the submersible, but it was descending and making headway on their minnow.

Kel ignored her; she had one last question she had to ask. “But why? Why do this at all?”

Joel grinned. “Why not? If I learned anything from our divorce, it was to take everything I could and run. I wanted part of your company, but you and Oscar beat me to it. You and your eminent domain crap, selling out to the government. You really opened my eyes after that. Well, you and Caihong did. I met her while I was in China on holiday, with some of that cash from our divorce. She and her friends in the Chinese Armed Forces made me an offer I couldn’t refuse.”

Her heart pounded in her chest; he wasn’t just worse than Collins, he was pure evil. She’d read him wrong for years. He wasn’t a patriot; he was only ever out to pad his bank account. His allegiance was to one and only one person: himself. Maybe it was

the kids who had blinded her from seeing the real Joel. But they were dead now, and their blood was on his hands, not hers. She bit her lip and forced back the tears. The only people left in her life were her crew, and with that sub headed their way, their clock was ticking.

She reached forward and cut the line. “Get that minnow out of there!”

“Ma’am?” Masters craned her head sideways.

Larsson, however, had learned his lesson from days earlier. He flipped Masters’ controls to his and took over the minnow, jamming the stick down and to the left, turning the nimble submersible in place and guiding it back down one of the many splinter tunnels.

Masters spun around and slapped her hand against her chair. She realized her pause had been a mistake.

“Masters!” Kel said.

“Yes, ma’am.” She twisted toward Kel, her face flush as if she were about to cry.

Kel leaned closer. “I need you to keep it together, Officer. Can you do that?”

Masters pursed her lips and nodded, but didn’t speak; she was biting her cheek, a nervous habit Kel’s mother used to have.

“Good. Now, I need you to build an automation routine for the minnow. I want you to lead that bogie away from us. Should it waver, pursue it. Ram it if need be. Just keep it distracted at all costs. We need to drop the *Bancroft* into radio silence so that thing can’t find us, and we can’t do that if we’re piloting it remotely.”

Realization crossed Masters’ face. They’d grown so used to seeing the Americans as allies that thinking about radio silence in their midst didn’t compute. It didn’t last long, though. Masters sprang into action; she opened a line to Weapons and started working through a program with whoever was on duty down there.

Their clock was ticking, and Kel needed to come up with another way out of this. She had to assume Oscar had shared with Joel how they had evaded the Hunter, so the odds of them using

that maneuver against this manned submersible were slim to none.

Kel spun around to face Adams. "Talk to me about this signal."

Waiting for Death

XO Oscar Allen



His head jerked awake. “Oi,” he muttered as he tried to roll over onto his back but failed. The centrifugal motion made resting in the middle of the bed an impossibility.

As he thought through the mechanics of the movement, the familiar tug of sleep pulled at him. The tendrils of unconsciousness massaged his mind, freeing it from the constraints of mathematics. Suddenly, a snag tore his eyes open. He shouldn’t be forced to the outer wall of the boat unless they were in a spiral dive, and that meant only one thing.

“Shit!” He sat up with a start. Although the cabin wasn’t spinning, his mouth felt as though he’d eaten a handful of cotton. That, and someone was using his head as a bass drum; each beat reminded him of the fifth of whiskey he’d practically drunk alone.

When he pushed up off the bed, he realized how dark it was. His familiar nightlight in his quarters was missing. He must have passed out in Kel’s. He reached forward, feeling in the blackness for the outline of the speed wheel. When his hand hit it, he slid to the left and jammed the handle over before pulling. The door swung inward, and the glare from the neighboring room sent him tumbling backward onto the bed.

“Damn all the lights!”

He brought his hands up to cover his eyes and leaned forward,

using his body weight for momentum to propel him. As he stepped over the two hatch thresholds and finally onto the bridge, he was met with an unexpected scene.

The small space was packed with people. He'd left his trio of troublemakers hours earlier, only to find they'd doubled in count and Kel was standing among them.

With his hands still shading his eyes, he eased his way forward until he came up behind Kel. She was leaning over Adams' shoulder.

"What's going on?" he asked, his voice thick and gravelly from the booze.

Kel spun around and smiled. "Oh... hey, sunshine. Welcome to the party. Thought you'd be off to the land of nod for a few more hours, but I'm glad you're here. We could use your help."

He slowly lowered his hand, having given his eyes time to adjust. As he craned his neck to study the overhead display, his heart skipped a beat. Not only were they on the move, they were working their way deeper. The *Bancroft* was coming up on six thousand meters.

"Why are we diving?" He saw it after the words came out. There was a bogey just over a klick from their location, with a last known position several minutes old.

"Turns out we interpreted the videos from the *Walrus* wrong." Kel glanced over at her coxswains. "The African *Tefnut* was on the up-and-up and was fighting to stay alive when they shot at Joel. Yeah, that's right; my former husband flipped sides too." She mimed an exploding head gesture with her hand as she slid sideways behind Larsson. Marín from Engineering stepped out of her way before easing back into the spot she'd vacated. "Apparently our divorce made him canoodle with a commie, and her beliefs stuck."

Adams shuddered and turned toward him, raising her eyebrows.

"We're only a quarter klick from our forward minnow," Masters said. "The terrain is slowing us down. We can't descend this section

of the cavern at nearly the same speed we have been so far.”

“Blimey.” Kel rested her hand on Larsson’s shoulder. “Use your best judgment, and take us down as fast as you’re comfortable. We can’t afford a cock-up at these depths.”

Oscar reached over and grabbed Kel’s tablet from her command chair. He couldn’t tell from the overhead display where they even were. So much had changed from earlier; he was lost.

As he panned around the map, he saw it. They’d gone deeper into the caverns to take a roundabout route back to the central shaft where this had started. They were now in the unmapped region, at least it was when he’d passed out.

“Drop another mine here.” Marín leaned forward and pointed at the cave walls on Parker’s screen. He was sitting beside Adams at Hinault’s old workstation. “This outcropping will make it easier to hide, and the debris field won’t rain down on us.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Parker tweaked his controls, relaying the commands to Weapons. From there, they’d uplink the coordinates into the awaiting drone mines before jettisoning them into the cavern.

While Larsson was piloting, Masters was double-checking all of his calculations and ensuring the tail segments were articulating properly.

“I’m picking up some unusual vibrations in the tenth spine,” Masters said.

“Get someone from Engineering on it,” Kel said.

“I’ll go.” Oscar raised his hand.

She spun around to face him. “Are you sure you’re up for it? You can—”

He shook his head and instantly regretted it. It felt like a bass drummer was playing a solo inside his skull, hammering at his temples. “Ugh... I’m... no use up here,” he groaned, taking a deep breath. “Besides, I’m not about to sit idle while you’re doing all the heavy lifting. I’ll take care of the boat. But before I do, could we have a quick word, ma’am?”

Kel studied him for a moment and then nodded, stepping closer.

He stepped backward a few steps, away from the stares of the others, before he lowered his voice. "Are you sure we should be running from the Hunter? I mean, last time we stood our ground."

She peered over her shoulder. The crew were heads down, focused on their stations. When she turned back toward him, her face had transformed. Where seconds earlier it was stoic and commanding, now it was covered in cracks of doubt. The fear in her eyes was palpable.

"That's not a Hunter."

He tilted his head. "What are you talking about?"

"Our friend following us is a Proteus Mark XII. It's a six-man submersible the Yanks use to deploy Navy SEALs on special ops. And if Adams' intel holds water, that model uses the same AI as the Hunter to help them with tactical decisions. With the details we fed the *Walrus* from our previous encounter, along with the SEALs at the helm, there's no chance they'll make the same mistakes as last time. In my book, we're starting at zero with this fight." Kel paused, and her lip quivered. "Being a CO doesn't guarantee success, Oscar. You know that as well as I do. Sometimes we have to take a leap of faith, and on occasion, we retreat."

He reached up and rubbed his hand over the back of his head. The bump where he'd hit the bulkhead stung to the touch. "But why are we working our way toward that signal? For all we know, it's—"

She raised her palm toward him. "We don't know what it is, so let's not guess. Heck, Müller was mumbling scripture to the Doc earlier. Something about 'following the pattern of the sound you heard from God, in the faith and love that are in him'... or some crap like that." She lowered her hand and stared into his eyes. "This isn't Engineering, and there aren't blueprints or training doctrine for this type of encounter. I'm just not comfortable staying idle, awaiting the Reaper's embrace. Are you?"

If she'd asked him that earlier, he'd have said yes. His faith in

humanity had all but evaporated, and his trust in his people had been repeatedly shoved off a cliff. At every turn, someone had failed or surprised him. And not always in a good way.

However, when he entered the bridge a few minutes ago, he saw the situation differently. With squinting eyes, sure, but the crew were fighting to stay alive. They weren't sitting back, waiting for the grim reaper to come calling like he was. They were clinging to life. And who was he to question their ability to beat the odds? They should have been dead a dozen times over before now.

She lowered her head to catch his gaze. "I didn't hear an answer. Has my XO given up?"

"I... did." He swallowed down the lingering cottony feeling in his throat. "But I have to admit, standing here, I'm questioning that decision."

"Brilliant! I can work with that." She straightened up. "XO Allen, I task you with mending our vessel. The *Bancroft* is the only thing keeping us alive, and you're his best keeper. So go, perform your magic."

"Captain!" Adams stood up and turned to face them. "The signal. It... changed. It's pulsing faster, ma'am. What should I do?"

Kel sighed and closed her eyes. He could literally see the weight on her shoulders pulling her down. Every decision she'd made getting them here. Every mistake and voice of self-doubt was spinning around in her mind, just as they were in his. It was tearing her apart. The least he could do was take some of the burden for himself.

"I've got the boat." He reached out and rested his hand on her shoulder. "You handle the Proteus. Okay?" He forced a smile, and she reluctantly returned it.

She took a deep breath and nodded. "The Proteus. Yeah, I'll take care of it."

When he turned to work his way aft, he came to a stop. Doc Hansen was standing in front of him with a needle gun in one hand and a headset in another.

“Doctor?” He squinted.

“A little bird told me you might be needing a pick-me-up after your slumber.” She raised the needler toward his shoulder. “I figured now was as good a time as any.” She paused, raising her eyebrow for permission to pull the trigger.

He chuckled. “Why the hell not? Fire away, Doc.”

She handed him the earpiece. After he put it in, she grasped his arm and eased the needle gun against it. When she squeezed the trigger, he watched the plunger push the clear liquid into his bicep. At first, it felt like any other shot. The resulting cold sent shivers radiating through his torso. But unlike the other shots he’d received, this one came with instant results.

One minute he was doing his best to stay moving and keep upright, and the next, everything snapped into focus. He straightened his back and shook his limbs. Energy was literally shooting through his veins.

“Yowza!” He drew in a breath and exhaled. “I feel twenty years younger.”

“You will, for a while.” She tilted her needler up and checked that the dosage had all been administered. “I give it an hour or two before you’ll be coming down for a landing. Just be careful, alright. You’re still a middle-aged man with a middle-aged body.”

He chuckled and tapped his earpiece to activate it. “Tell that to these wings.” He hopped up in the air and sprinted aft down the hall.

As he was descending the ladder, Kel’s voice came in over his ear. “XO Allen, the tenth spine is getting worse. Are you close?”

He grasped the ladder on the side and did a bunny hop, pushing his feet to the outside of the rails and squeezing them tight. Then, in one quick motion, he slid down. When he hit the ground, he started running. “I just landed. I’ll have a read on it in a moment. If we have room, try reducing the angle of descent. It should lower the torque.”

“Roger that,” Larsson said.

He sprinted aft, hopping over the open hatch thresholds like he was a new dolphin on a fire drill. Whatever this stuff was the doc gave him, he needed to get some in pill form.

When he hopped through Engineering, he ducked right and snatched a few tools off the workbench. A blowtorch, a tool caddy, and a bottle of military lubricant. Luckily for him, his crew followed protocol, and everything was where it was supposed to be. He quickly checked over his tools, and once he was happy he had what he needed, he continued aft, torch in one hand and tool caddy in the other. The tenth spine was the next one ahead, past his personal quarters.

The hatch was already open, like the others had been, except this time there were voices coming from the other side. He slowed to a walk and eased up to the threshold, being careful not to make a sound.

“Dude, give me a hand.” The first voice laughed.

“Come on! Enough of the damn monkey games,” a second voice said. “Cut the crap, and jam that other bar in the crack. I’d do it myself, but I can’t.”

That last voice was familiar. He’d heard it before. Then it hit him. It was Daven, the twat he’d burned. Whoever he was with, they must be screwing with the spine. If they damaged the articulating joint, the *Bancroft* would have trouble moving anywhere down here.

He leaned sideways and quietly set down the tool caddie. Reaching out, he flipped the top open and pulled out the largest tool he could find. It wasn’t his favorite hundred-centimeter pipe wrench, but its heft would do the job. One tool to beat them, and another to burn them.

Whatever he did, he had to move fast. The only thing he had in his favor was the element of surprise. As he counted down from ten, he hit three, and the *Bancroft* pivoted, throwing him off and sending him falling backward into the equipment. At the same time, the wrench in his left hand slammed against one of the steam drums.

To call the resulting sound a gong would be like calling a tuba a small brass party favor. Daven must have been thrown off by the noise, because the device they were wedging into the joint fell, sending several sharp clangs echoing through Engineering.

Oscar couldn't wait any longer. He flicked the igniter on the hand-held welding torch and jumped across the threshold. With all of his forward momentum, he hadn't planned for his right foot to come down on the pole they'd been trying to wedge into the joint. As the metal rod rolled forward, he tumbled backward onto his butt. It was just as well he did, as Daven was waiting on the other side. A pipe whooshed over his head and slammed into the hatch entrance, sending the man swinging it reeling.

"Argggghh!!!" Daven dropped to his knees, holding his hands tight to his chest while rocking back and forth.

He wasn't about to ignore a gift like this. Oscar scrambled upright, waving the welding torch outward in an arc as he went. He did his best to aim for the towering man's clothes and skin. With Daven being twice his size, he was an easy target.

When the blue luminous glow of the welding flame came into contact with Daven's cotton shirt, the tip burned yellow, and he lit up like a bonfire. The screams followed a second later. They weren't simply piercing; they were the loudest cries of pain he'd ever heard. Fortunately for Oscar, the oxygen thief hadn't been wearing his flame-resistant coveralls. It made turning him into a human torch that much easier.

Daven waved his fiery hands about, struggling to put out the fire. There was nowhere to lie down and roll around, like every kid had been taught since they were little, and the open grating beneath their feet wasn't exactly an ideal flame blanket.

Oscar's mouth fell open, and he stared in awe, motionless and unable to move. It wasn't until the charred body stood up and started stumbling forward that he shook out of his daze. If he didn't act fast, he'd turn into a walking charcoal meat bag himself.

He cut the torch and tossed it sideways before crab-crawling

backward, but he misjudged the distance. Within half a meter, he slammed the back of his head into the inner bulkhead. Like lightning to a metal rod, pain shot through his spine with a jolt, knocking the wind out of him.

“Fu... c... k!”

Oscar struggled to catch his breath and bring the room into focus, all while frantically sliding his hand over the floor grating, searching for the wrench he’d dropped. His gaze locked on it when his hands failed to find their target. It was down below his feet, just out of reach.

A moment later, the lumbering human torch stepped on it and lurched forward. Oscar’s life flashed before his eyes. In that second, everything fell into focus. He saw his past failures for what they truly were: a lonely single man’s attempt at finding a purpose.

Be it through his constant tinkering, his building of the *Bancroft*, or even now helping fix the articulating spine, he’d lived his life on an endless treadmill, always struggling to find meaning. But each and every time, he came up short. His constant tinkering led to tears and missed love, whereas the *Bancroft*, his only true passion, brought about humanity’s earthly end. This would be a fitting death.

Life is an echo. The emotions and actions you send out into the world circle back to you. He’d always been taught that. His mom constantly reminded him that he’d reap what he sowed. “Give, and you will receive,” she used to say.

He lived a secluded existence under the ocean, one that meant he didn’t fit neatly into societal norms when he was on land. It also limited his sphere of influence to sow anything worthwhile. All he spread was death and destruction below the waves, and its representative was presently staring him in the face.

For a second time in as many days, he closed his eyes and accepted his fate.

A thunderous thwack of metal against flesh roused him back to his senses. When his eyes sprang open, there was a flaming mass at

his feet. He flinched and pulled his knees to his chest just as a rod shot over his shoulder, shoving the fiery remains of Daven away.

Oscar twisted backward and peered around the hatch entrance. Cary was standing there, holding a long, heavy metal pipe. At first glance, it looked like the one they used to repair the ballast transfer or other liquid transfer lines between compartments.

He'd only known the man for a few weeks, and in the past two days, he'd saved his life twice. Cary was always there when he needed him most. He was a modern-day guardian angel.

"Thank you," Oscar muttered. "I thought I was about to become an ember there for a second."

Cary merely nodded. Droplets of sweat beaded up on his face, and his bicep muscles were twitching. His eyes darted around the chamber as he searched for the other voice they'd heard. He was amped up on something, and his adrenaline was overflowing.

Oscar pushed up off the ground and leaned forward to grab the wrench he'd dropped. When he straightened up, he stepped back away from the smoldering body. The smell of burning flesh filled the room.

"You know, you came to my primary school once." Cary's eyes were jumping less, but he was still searching.

Oscar did a double take and glanced at Cary. The man must be in shock. He was talking gibberish. "What?"

"You visited my school when I was a kid." Cary's gaze lingered on the burning body.

He tilted his head. "What school was that? I've done quite a few of those in my time." It was one of the few things he did while they were at port.

Cary took a hesitant step forward, lowering the pipe closer to the smoldering corpse. "Hermitage. I was in sixth. This was about eight years ago."

Eight years. That seemed like an eternity. It was after he and Kel had re-upped with the military and turned their back on the venture capital bankroll.

Oscar nodded. "I had a lot more time on my hands in those days."

"I remember it like it was yesterday." Cary swallowed hard and set the end of the pipe on the ground. "It was the reason I joined the navy."

"I'm sorry." Oscar lowered his head. "I didn't—"

"Don't be," Cary interrupted, turning to look him in the eyes. "I'd be dead if it weren't for you. We all would."

He passed the wrench to his left hand and flexed his right. The tingle from the stitches was returning. "Well, I should be saying the same about you. You've saved my life twice now."

Cary adjusted his gaze to the ground. "Do you remember what you said?"

Oscar tilted his head. "When? The other day when you saved me?"

Cary chuckled and waved his hand. "No. At my school. I know it was a while ago, but it's been seared in my mind forever." His eyes locked on the smoldering remains of Daven. "You told us about how you'd never known your father because of the war in Afghanistan. The twenty-year war that ended with no meaningful change besides death. You told us how you joined the navy and returned the second time to be that agent of change. To prevent someone from taking away your freedoms. Your hope. Your dreams." He turned toward Oscar.

"You asked us to look inside ourselves and imagine someone took away our feeling of safety, or our ability to be ourselves. Our unfiltered true selves. You reminded us... you reminded me, that to have that feeling of safety required people. Larger-than-life people who guarded the walls and protected us from the onrush of evil. From the governments that wanted nothing more than to see our way of life destroyed." He shook his head. "It was a surreal career fair that day. You seemed to be in your own headspace after that speech. I don't even know if you remember me coming up to you and—"

“Red waistcoat, white shirts, black trousers,” Oscar interrupted. “Were those your uniforms?”

“I hated wearing those ugly things.” Cary pulled at his collar. “They kept us warm when it rained, so there’s that.”

Oscar nodded, staring at the young man’s face. For some reason, his eyes seemed more familiar than they had moments earlier. “I remember now. You asked me how old you had to be to join the navy. To be on a sub.”

Cary smiled. “I was ready to enlist right then. The seven years that followed were excruciating.”

“Well, I’m certainly glad you did.” Oscar looked up and the tension in his stomach loosened. “I’ll be a monkey’s uncle.” He exhaled sharply. “I was wondering where that second voice I heard went.” He pointed the wrench up toward the ceiling.

Cary turned his head and retched, bringing his hand up to his mouth.

Up near the corner of the ceiling was a body impaled on a rod. The dolphin was staring wide-eyed at the ground, and their insides were hanging out for the world to see. He watched in silence as their blood streamed down the lever toward the wall and then finally down through the floor grating.

“That’s what they get fer messing with the spine,” Cary said.

Oscar reached up and tapped his earpiece. “I’ve found our problem, ma’am. Cary and I will have it clear in a moment.”

“Splendid,” Kel said. “We have to move quick. Every moment we’re stationary, we’re losing ground to the Proteus. I need the *Bancroft* at his best. But, Oscar...”

He narrowed his gaze. “Captain?”

She paused before replying. “We’re approaching our maximum tested depth.”

He didn’t need her to tell him what that meant. On one side, they had death looming from above. On the other, the crushing pressure at the bottom of the ocean beckoned menacingly.

“Yes, ma’am. If that’s the case, I could use some hands down

here to patch. Can you rally some bodies while I,” he stared up at the bloody corpse, “finish... cleaning up our mess?”

“I can do that. I think...” her voice trailed off.

He needed her to focus on the signal and the Proteus. The rest of the boat was his to deal with.

“We’ve got this, Captain. Remember... fair winds—”

She chuckled. “And following seas.”

He reached up and killed the comm.

Oscar spun around to face Cary. “Why don’t you grab the hacksaw? We need to cut this guy down before we can pull out that rod.”

“I’m on it!” Cary dropped the pipe and hopped backward through the open hatch.

As he watched the dolphin go, he couldn’t help but feel like the young man could teach him a thing or two about himself. About wanting to live. It seemed he’d made more of an impression than he’d ever imagined.

One Mind, One Purpose

Captain Kel Williams



Tapping the connection open, Oscar cut to Gianna. She picked up instantly.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Oscar needs as many able bodies in Engineering as you can round up. He’s forming some patch crews.” Kel didn’t need to say more; the notion of patching a boat wasn’t something you messed around with, especially this far underwater.

“I’m on it!” Gianna cut the connection.

Kel took a deep breath and studied her display. She’d neglected to tell Oscar about the sonar beacons they left behind. They’d been triggering for several minutes. The *Bancroft* hadn’t simply lost ground to the Proteus; they’d given up most of their advantage. Whoever was piloting that death machine was efficient.

She stepped up beside Parker. “How long until the Proteus enters our first minefield?”

“Assuming it’s moving at the same speed we witnessed between sonar one and two,” Parker began, “it should be coming into the minefield in... three minutes.”

That wasn’t a lot of time. They needed to regain their lead to reach the signal before the Proteus intercepted them.

As she reached for the pole beside Adams, the instruments lit up like fireworks. Red and yellow flashes covered the display. No

matter what, they couldn't seem to catch a break.

"Tell me that's the kitchen letting us know our orders are ready." She slid up to Adams.

Her CIS glanced over her shoulder, eyebrows furrowed. "Ma'am?"

"Sorry." Kel shook her head. Now was not the time anyone needed snark. She had to stay focused. "I know better than to tell jokes under pressure. It's against regulations. Tell me that wasn't our first mine we laid down?"

"Umm... okay." Adams rubbed her forehead. "Then I have good news. Your tuna fish is ready, and if that exploding mine doesn't slow down the waiter, then our food will be here in under a minute."

Despite the solid attempt at humor, Kel slammed her hand against the pole. She was doing everything she could not to lose it. Her people didn't need to see her fall apart in front of them again. Once was enough for any career, and it was her poor judgments that had gotten them into this mess in the first place. The sooner they arrived at the bottom, the better.

She glanced at her coxswains. "Larsson, Masters, all ahead full. I want to be on top of that signal as fast as possible."

Masters jerked her neck backward and stared, her lips trembling. "What... about our depth, ma'am?"

They had another hundred meters before they reached the *Bancroft's* theoretical crush depth. Everyone on board knew the number; it was drilled into their heads, even if they weren't allowed to tell anyone. While it was far deeper than any other AAFEUS submersible in history and rivaled that of many research vessels, it was as real as the implosion that would follow when they hit the magic number. The kicker was that they'd never tested it in reality, only in a simulation. She'd wanted to create a working prototype to prove it, but the brass wouldn't fund it. They preferred a field test instead to see if the design was all it was promised to be. Budgets were as tight as crew quarters on a long deployment.

“Don’t worry. He’ll hold up.” Kel tapped the back of the frightened woman’s chair. “The alternative is unthinkable. But even if he doesn’t, would you rather die sitting still or take a punt on escaping with your life?”

Masters didn’t say another word. She simply turned and started speaking to Larsson in a low whisper, doing her best to navigate the forward minnow while working together on their descent strategy. They needed to get underway and issue the orders to the rest of the crew, while at the same time, planning their route past the obstacles ahead.

While most of the operation of the *Bancroft* was automated, there were still manual safeguards and safety measures to take into account. Notifying Engineering was one of many steps. Kel knew Oscar would be ready; it was their boat she was worried about.

When Kel checked the display, the minnow was holding steady a quarter of a klick ahead. It was coming up on another turn in the opposite direction. While the descent hadn’t been rough thus far, it was taxing making all the micro-adjustments to navigate around the outcroppings. The computer helped with the route planning, but every coxswain made tweaks of their own based on the situation.

She checked the countdown clock for the signal, assuming that’s what it actually was. They were under six hours until the zero point. Somewhere in their decision making process, after they’d first moved the *Bancroft*, the numbers had changed; they’d lost over sixteen hours.

While part of her wanted to know what was at the signal, not knowing was somehow easier. It was all things and nothing at the same time; it was both their savior and their end. Being a scientist, her mind went to Schrödinger’s cat, but Joel had ruined that analogy for her earlier.

In her heart, she hoped that whoever was there would have defensive capabilities to take out their hostile pursuer. And while she wanted them to be friendly, she wasn’t about to assume they were. With the *Proteus* gone, maybe they could turn over the

Bancroft with no loss of lives.

As she watched the numbers tick away, their descent accelerated, and her mind wandered off into whether they should turn into one of the splinter tunnels. They could take the *Proteus* head-on in those: mano a mano.

If they'd been on a destroyer, they'd have an arsenal at their disposal, both short and long-range armaments. But here in a submarine, torpedoes, mines, and depth charges were their weapons of choice. And while they had alternate forms of the deadly projectiles, they had defenseless positions covering ninety-five percent of their boat. Add to that the fact that explosions were double-edged swords in these caves, and the *Proteus* became a formidable foe—especially when they had to guess at its armaments.

The minnow ticked off another important marker, lowering itself below the seven-kilometer mark: the theoretical crush depth of the *Bancroft*. Seeing it change made her stomach do somersaults.

A few seconds later, everything went sideways.

The panels overhead flashed red, pulling her out of her mental tangle of thoughts. Kel searched the display for warnings of hull breaches, but there were none.

It was the signal; it changed again.

Adams spun around, wearing the same wide-eyed mask of concern she'd had on earlier. "The signal morphed, Captain. This time, the countdown reset below one hour."

Kel's mouth fell open. "How's... that possible? I mean, can we even make it there in time?"

"The minnow's not far," Masters said. "It can't be but a few more turns. We should have visual soon."

Her heart was thumping in her ears, like an endless knocking against the outer hull.

Thump, thump, thump.

It was the sound of the *Proteus* calling. It wanted to end her once and for all, but she wasn't ready to die—not yet.

“Parker!” She hopped over beside her weapons engineer. Marín was standing at his side, squeezed between the wall and his workstation.

"Captain?" they said in unison—one mind, one purpose.

“I want a dense field of mines at the first opportunity.” Kel reached up and rubbed at the itch in her nose. “If that blasted thing can somehow slow down and trigger these without being damaged, then I want to ensure it hasn’t a snowball’s chance in Hades of neutralizing them all. I don’t care if it’s the most ideal location. Just crank up the sensitivity and drop ’em like they’re hot. Is that understood?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Her plan reeked of sheer desperation, and she was grasping at straws, but the alternative was an impossible thought. Death’s icy breath was upon their napes, and she was scrambling for a shotgun to blast the confounded specter away.

Interlude

The Builders

Willow didn't know how the hell Helios was pulling it off, but the young builder kept resetting the low-level safeguards. If Hera not taught her to build in safeguards while seeding her fragments, it probably would have already hit zero.

She was doing everything she could to control her emotions beside her Builder brethren, but fear was leaking into her thoughts. Her fingers gently nudged the holographic interface with practiced urgency, recalibrating the fragmented safeguards; each movement was a desperate gambit against time. As she locked eyes with Helios for a split second, she sensed he knew what she was doing. In that infinitesimally brief moment, Willow knew she had to outwit him to preserve their world teetering on the edge of annihilation.

Whack-a-Mole

XO Oscar Allen



Ounder six hours to less than one. They had a lot of ground to cover, but his biggest fear wasn't the Proteus. He couldn't help with that. His concern was the magic number of seven kilometers.

While he knew it wasn't exact, he'd helped run the simulations that showed what would happen below that depth. Imperfect seals and seams would start to leak first, especially considering the rocks that had been smashing into the hull in recent days. Assuming their patching held, the articulating spine would be the next to fail. Despite its nanopolymer mesh reinforcements throughout the substrate, the simple fact was that the pressure was just too much.

He stared at the crew he'd gathered. Two dozen hands. Most of them were unfamiliar faces, and many were oxygen thieves—a thought he needed to push to the back of his mind. Cary had also held that title until recently.

“Alright, we're approaching our crush depth. We need to break off into teams of two.” He reached over and placed his hand on Cary's shoulder. “Cary here will distribute the sealant and patches you should use. I know you've all been trained on how to apply a patch. Hell, if you haven't had a few dreams of patching up a sinking ship by now, I'd say we failed in your training.”

A few muted chuckles broke the eerie quiet.

“We've only got six of these handheld torches if you have a

bigger leak. If you find one, do what you can, and make sure to throw an alert up. We'll have someone there in a jiffy to help you out."

He paused and stared out over their faces. The fear in their eyes was impossible not to notice. His job was to push them past it.

"I'm not gonna stand up here and lie to you. By now you know I'm not wired that way. Any deeper and no amount of patching or reinforcements will hold the *Bancroft* together. The alternative, though, isn't any better."

"Wh—why don't we turn and fi—fight?" one of the dolphins asked, their voice quivering.

Oscar stared at them for a moment. He wasn't sure exactly how to answer the dolphin because he wasn't Kel. But whatever her reason, he wouldn't question it.

His great-grandfather used to have a saying when his friends started dying of old age. He remembered watching the man fight to stay healthy as everyone he loved died around him. In the end, he was the last in his circle. Over one hundred and seven years young.

"Sometimes the reaper's blade has a longer reach than you're prepared for."

It was lame, but it was the only analogy that popped into his head.

The group stared at him in silence, and then, one at a time, their heads nodded. There wasn't much else he could say.

He lowered his hands to his sides and swallowed hard. "Let's keep the *Bancroft* sealed tight. Pair off, grab your supplies, and come talk to me on your way out to get your assignments throughout the boat."

Two by two, the dolphins lined up in front of him, and he sent them on their way.

"You're team one; you're in compartments four through eight, keel side. Go, go!

"You're team two; same as the last group, but topside.

"Team three, I want you aft of the towline. Keep an eye near the

prop shaft and the hydroplane actuators. Now go!”

He passed out the directions team by team, alternating forward and aft until he’d run out of people. The teams had dispersed; their footsteps echoing into the distance as they sprinted to their assignments. He’d marked off each team’s location on the computer display as he went.

When they were done, he studied the final breakdown. All that remained unmonitored were the main engineering compartments, both topside and keel. It was a lot of space to cover between Cary and himself, but they’d have to make it work.

“Sir, I kept a welding torch for us.” Cary set the laser torch down on the tabletop, along with several cartridges. The same equipment that used to require massive computers and power sources back in his day now fit nicely in the palm of his hand.

Even with the technical advantages they’d made, it was still no match for the forces of Mother Nature. Every time he thought about the billions of liters of water pushing down on them, he cringed.

Cary checked over the torch, making sure it had fresh battery packs and spools of carbon-reinforced steel, by far the bulkiest part of the apparatus. “Do you think there’s less pressure on us in this cavern? You know, with the outside sealed off and all.” He pocketed a battery pack.

Oscar shrugged. “I suppose, if it were a closed system. We know of at least one opening, though, so there’s bound to be many more. Let’s hope it’s reduced. We could use any advantage at this point.” He mimicked Cary and pocketed some patches and batteries.

When he glanced up, the young man was fiddling with the torch, his mind clearly elsewhere. “What’s eating at you, dolphin?”

Cary never got a chance to reply because the nearby alarms started blaring. “Hull breach detected in Engineering, topside segment six,” a computer voice said in his ear.

Oscar snatched the welder out of the dolphin’s hand and was working his way toward the ladder before his partner even reacted. His deep thought, whatever it was, had slowed him down. He’d

help him see that later. For now, they needed to climb two levels.

This was their first breach, and they were already caught with their trousers down. As he climbed for his life up the metal rungs, he craned his neck and started eyeing where segment six was relative to this access point. The ladder bisected the compartment, and when he glanced left, he saw it.

Several fine rivulets of water were visible near the corner where the ceiling curved into the starboard wall. He was thankful they'd been able to convince the military to install the pressure and moisture detection sensors. They'd gone into countless meetings arguing over false positives, but in the end, sensible modern technology prevailed.

He hopped back off the ladder and tapped his earpiece twice to connect to Cary. "I'm eyeing a hairline on the top, starboard side. Applying a patch now."

Reaching into his pocket, he grabbed the welder and started climbing the frame of a nearby machine rack to get within reach of the leak. Leaning over the machinery, he reached out, being careful that he had a firm grip on the damp metal support. When his hand was under the water, he held the tip of the welder against the hull and squeezed the trigger.

The yellow-orange glow of the welding arc shot forward, sending sparks in all directions. He did his best to hold his head to the side to avoid the pricks of light while still guiding the filler into the microscopic cracks. The laser-beam welding process they used to patch was precise and allowed the filling material to be pushed deep into the weld, making for both a strong and a clean seal.

The challenge, as with all welding, was not overheating a region of the hull and causing more extensive damage. By the time it was leaking inside the boat, multiple layers of hull had already been compromised; so, besides this being a stopgap fix, it would make matters worse if done poorly. When they had time to deploy some external drones, they might be able to put more permanent welds in place. Assuming they could even find the hairline cracks.

As the fine stream of water disappeared, the breach sensors reset. The underlying issue had been repaired, and the residual water inside the boat was being routed to pumps via gravity.

Oscar tapped his ear to connect back to Cary in Engineering. “I sealed off the leak, and I’m heading down.” He hopped off the equipment rack and worked his way forward toward the ladder. “How’s the rest of the boat looking?”

“We’ve got minor breaches in compartments two and twelve,” Cary began. “The crews have been dispatched, and repairs are underway. Otherwise, the *Bancroft* is holding together, sir.”

Those were famous last words he’d prefer not to utter. Not yet, anyhow. “What’s our depth?”

There was a pause as Cary flipped screens. “We’re at... seven wun ze-ro fo-wer meters, diving at thuh-ree ze-ro degrees on the stern planes, and we’re articulated fi-yiv ze-ro percent starboard.”

They were pushing it attempting that steep of a dive. While their boat was rated for higher, things always seemed to go awry when you pushed the limits, especially this deep. The last thing they needed to deal with was having to scramble a team to fight spillages or battery issues.

Flash of Light

Captain Kel Williams



Kel Williams had been talking barely visible growths short. Now just regulation length, two years ago she'd always visible growths short. Now just a grooming habit that forced her to stop biting her nails and, as a happy accident, made it easier to use electronic touch devices. Nothing annoyed her more than the tapping of fingernails against screens.

She instinctively brought her right hand up and bit at her thumbnail. Having been down and out for a few days, combined with the stressful lead-up while running silent, meant her meticulous self-care routine was all but destroyed. While the stress of the chase was enough to push anyone over the edge, it also didn't help that the internal display of the *Bancroft* was lit up like a Christmas tree.

Her team had been playing whack-a-mole with the leaks for the past thirty minutes. All the while, they hadn't heard a peep from the Proteus. Part of her hoped that the explosion they detected over half an hour ago had taken knocked the beast out. But she needed to be careful that hope didn't prevail over tactics.

"We're down to our last dozen mines, ma'am," Marín said. "Should we stop dropping them for—"

"No!" she interrupted, pulling her hand down and spinning to face her weapons officer. "Continue laying down our defensive shield. We shan't jeopardize our lead by leaving our aft exposed."

Marín stared at her for a moment before finally nodding. “Aye, ma’am.”

The crew on the bridge had spiraled into a deep silence when they passed seven thousand meters, and the farther they descended, the more eerie the noiselessness got. They knew the risk of diving at this depth, and every meter meant they were closer to certain death.

Her overhead panel chimed, and she glanced up. There was another breach alarm aft in Engineering. This one looked more substantial than the last. The pressure ratings weren’t simply a trickle like before.

“Down to Davy Jones’s depths,” she muttered, bringing her hand up to cover her mouth. Their options had narrowed the deeper they ventured, until they only had two remaining.

“What’s the status on our minnow?” She stepped sideways, closer to her coxswains.

Both Masters and Larsson had been preoccupied piloting through a particularly nasty segment of the cavern, and Masters needed to put the minnow on autopilot. That meant slower going, but it still made forward progress. While it maintained a hundred-meter lead, it wouldn’t take the *Bancroft* long to catch up, even with adverse terrain.

Masters adjusted her secondary display to enlarge the minnow’s camera view. At first, there wasn’t much to see. The LiDAR was echoing back returns that highlighted the massive chamber the minnow had entered. It was larger than any space they’d passed through thus far, with plenty of room to hide a base of some kind.

As she peered over the coxswain’s shoulder, she watched the telemetry coming in. Meter by meter, the picture of the cavern grew clearer. Details filled in. The entire space appeared barren and lifeless. Not at all like the cornucopia of life they’d seen elsewhere in the cave system. This wasn’t what she’d expected to find at all. A secret research facility, yes. A cold dark nothingness, no.

Kel shook her head. “This doesn’t make a lick of sense. Where’s

the signal emanating from?”

Masters overlaid the signal on the LiDAR and pointed at the screen. “Right there. In the middle of the chamber.”

She squinted. There was nothing there. “Bring the minnow in for a closer—”

The screen flashed white and blinded her. Splotches filled her vision, and she raised her hand up, shielding her eyes. It was as if the monitor had witnessed an explosion, and all the telemetry from the minnow had disappeared. In the dim lighting of the bridge, the effect had been dramatic. She’d never seen a display panel strobe like that before.

Masters shook her head and whacked the display while attempting to type a few commands on her keyboard. For a few seconds, Kel thought they’d lost the minnow.

It wasn’t until the white noise receded that an outline formed. A circular structure appeared in the silhouette of their LiDAR. It looked like a round stepped pyramid. She counted nine steps in all, and floating above it was a sphere. Stranger still, there didn’t appear to be anything connecting it with the structure beneath it.

“What are we seeing on visual?” Kel asked, leaning closer.

“One second.” Masters adjusted her controls and brought up the external camera on the overhead monitor.

The steps were glowing a brilliant greenish white. They almost appeared to shimmer, as if sparks of light were shooting through them.

“What the heck is that?” Doc Hansen asked.

“No idea,” Masters muttered.

Kel hadn’t noticed the doc walk up. She glanced at the woman. Her hair was a mess, and her mouth was gaping open. She had all but disappeared into her office after Kel came out of her coma. The stress of the last week had taken a toll on her, as it had on everyone on board.

She returned her attention to the display. The visual light show from the circular ring plateaus had changed. It almost appeared as

if the steps were shrinking.

“The countdown, sir.” Adams snapped her head backward and pointed at her control. “It cut in half.”

When Kel saw the numbers, she swallowed hard. They’d jumped from a comfortable thirty minutes to a meager ten. She wasn’t even sure they could reach it in time. Her gamble had hit a dead end, her third such bet in the last week. Yet again, her gut had led them astray. And for what? A countdown. The race to the bottom for a daft light show.

As she watched the circular plateaus descend in unison, the floating sphere dropped as well. Maybe this whole thing was a bomb. She’d ignored the others’ thoughts on the matter. To her, it was a pointless exercise luring them down only to blow them up. They’d be dead in a few months in the cavern. It was far easier to wait them out if they simply wanted the *Bancroft*. The countdown had to be something more. She could feel it.

All eyes on the bridge were transfixed on the morphing alien structure. One by one, the nine rings lowered downward and continued past the baseline. They were receding into the ground, creating a funnel shape mirroring their starting point.

When the first ring locked into place in the inverted plateau, a blast of light radiated up and out of the pit. The effect reminded her of a supernova shock wave she’d seen in countless films and video games. Except rather than exploding mass outward, it shot a halo of rippling light in slow motion. And it wasn’t merely a flash; it had a wavelike structure.

She watched as the sphere of light expanded upward. When it hit the minnow, their signal flickered and blanked out for a second. Masters tried to make an adjustment, but it cleared up on its own.

“How’s our little fish faring?” Kel asked, eyeing her team. They were still transfixed on the descending steps, acting as if they hadn’t even heard her. It wasn’t until she glanced at Larsson’s display that she saw it. The orb of light had somehow passed through the rock beneath them and was rapidly approaching their boat.

She reached out and grasped the pole to her right. "Prepare for impact!"

All eyes shifted their attention from the ring spectacle to the coxswain's display, but it was too late. The sphere of light hit the *Bancroft*.

At first, she thought it would pass over them, and they wouldn't even notice it. But the wave of energy wasn't of this world, at least not something she'd ever seen or experienced. The light passed through their hull like it wasn't there.

Kel watched it enter the bridge from the forward compartment, and she reached out her hand toward it. It appeared to be moving in slow motion. She didn't know why, but the hypnotic rippling surface drew her in. When she touched it, she swore the boundary receded before it drove forward.

As the light passed over her fingers and up her arm, it was like her body had been submerged in a warm swimming pool. The energy relaxed and calmed her, seeming to free her from weeks of pent-up stress. She hadn't felt this good in years. It wasn't until the light hit her face that the images flashed before her eyes.

Lapping waves.

White sand.

A tropical beach.

Palm trees.

Her crew standing topside.

Smiles of joy.

She turned her head, surveying her people. Everyone on the bridge had their eyes closed. She'd never had an out-of-body experience, but if she had, this is how she'd imagine it would be.

"Did anyone else catch that?" she asked.

No one replied. They simply stood there, frozen in space and time.

When she reached out to touch Adams, her hand broke through

the other side of the sphere of light, into the darkness. A coldness passed through her. It was like she'd dove headfirst into a tub filled with ice cubes. All the air rushed from her lungs, but she couldn't move. Neither her arm nor any part of her body would respond. No matter how hard she tried, she was stuck in place until another set of images flashed before her.

Water rising.

Bloated blue bodies.

The Bancroft cracked open.

Oscar's lifeless face.

His body floating through the boat.

He was dead.

They were all dead.

She bent forward and gasped for breath as screams of terror bellowed from her lungs, echoing through the silent air on the bridge.

The crew recoiled backward. Shock and fear strained their faces.

Every square centimeter of her knew what they needed to do. She didn't know how, but their path was suddenly clear.

Death's Evil Grin

XO Oscar Allen



Could he be dead? He was still breathing, but by the time he was pulled out of the water, he had been underwater for over a minute. The pressure was becoming a human popsicle.

Oscar tugged on the line, but there was no reaction. No tug back. No response of any kind.

The breach was larger than the last two, and the pumps weren't keeping up with it. While they'd slowed it with the first set of patches, the second hadn't been going as swimmingly.

His teeth chattered as he tossed the blanket on the ground. He wasn't about to let the dolphin die down there. Not after everything the oxygen thief had done to keep him alive. It was the least he could do.

He checked the seal on his mask and took three quick breaths. One, two, three... He jumped through the narrow hole in the floor grating, into the water below.

The icy liquid hit him like a brick wall. This time, it felt even harsher than the last. Oscar had only a few seconds before his body would be forced to gasp. He needed to get to Cary and cut the man loose. After that, he could head down and work the leak, if he lasted that long.

The hose helped to guide him to Cary's body. He made sure not to pull on it and possibly dislodge the other end from the dolphin's mouth. From the looks of it, the hull leak had expanded under one

of the condensers, and Cary had slid under it with the hand torch.

His lungs screamed in pain, willing him to breathe. He knew better. But even after years of training, the primal drive to survive at all costs was an impossible bond to break. He grasped the edge of the condenser and pulled himself under it, next to Cary.

When he reached the man's face, he recoiled backward in surprise. Cary's eyes went wide, and he lashed out, swinging his arm toward Oscar. He was panicking. If he got ahold of Oscar, they'd both be done for.

He knocked the flailing hands away and pushed back, searching near Cary's body for where he was caught. His breathing hose or outfit must have snagged on something. It was the only explanation.

As he pulled himself around Cary's other side, he saw it. The hose was stuck on one of the ballast tank transfer lines. Somehow, it had gotten tangled around the coupling. He reached down and untangled the tubular knot of hose, giving the length a tug when it was free.

Oscar couldn't hold his breath any longer. He had to surface. Pushing off, he was coming out from under the condenser when it hit.

At first, he thought he was in shock. The warmth passed over his legs, and the urge to urinate was suddenly overpowering. An all-too-common reaction for males when they touch warm water. It wasn't until the warmth passed through his torso and reached his head that he realized something was off.

Sunlight.

Billowing clouds.

Lines of derelict planes.

Boats. So many boats.

Grounded on a sandy beach.

Collins' smiling face.

He inhaled when he saw the evil grin of death staring back at

him. Instead of the comfortable, life-giving oxygen filling his lungs, he felt the tendrils of freezing water expand through his chest. The contrast to the warmth around his body was shocking, and he gagged, struggling to expel the deadly liquid. His body needed air, but he was too far from the surface to escape. The vice-like grips of his icy, watery grave tugged him down.

His last thought was the warmth passing over him. The brief comfort was replaced by paralyzing visions of the *Bancroft* cracked open on the ocean floor.

He'd done it again. He'd failed everyone he ever loved.

Full Circle

Captain Kel Williams



K“But hang on, we’ll be in danger!” Larsson began. “Dive! Dive!”

She reached out and grabbed his arm, yanking with everything she had. He tumbled sideways out of his seat, and when his body hit the floor, she didn’t hesitate. She climbed over him and hopped into his chair, pulling the controls closer to her once she was in place.

Over the years, she’d piloted submarines thousands of times. While never as a coxswain, the fact that she’d designed the *Bancroft* meant she knew the boat better than anyone. Except for Oscar, of course.

“What the hell?” Larsson pushed up off the ground and brushed at his trousers.

She ignored him and checked over the controls, disengaging the turbine-to-pump-jet lock before easing the throttle forward. The boat lurched, and she scrambled to get control of the entire length. She hadn’t prepared to pilot both ends. This wasn’t open water. She was used to simply having the rear segments mirror the front, but with a delay.

“I’ll take the spine. You focus on piloting.” Masters flipped the override switch, sending the spine controls to her workstation.

The dolphin glanced at her several times, studying Kel, but never questioning her. Even with uncertainty in her eyes, she

followed orders.

“Captain, it’s...” Adams hesitated.

“What the blazes is it?” Kel kept her attention fixed on the terrain in front of them. They had two more turns before they entered the cavern, and she couldn’t afford to bash into something. Not after her coxswains had gotten them this far.

Adams cleared her throat. “The sphere of light... it’s—”

“Detonating the mines,” Kel interrupted.

Adams leaned forward. “How’d... you know?”

To be honest, she didn’t. But the vision was as clear as Caribbean blue waters. The *Bancroft* would die on the ocean floor. Whether it was from the mines above or the crushing pressure, their fate was sealed in the darkness.

The overhead lights flashed red, warning them of nearby explosions. She kept her eyes forward, twisting the stick and tweaking the nose past the first turn. Masters was doing her part to echo the movement with the rest of the boat.

Part of her wanted to know how the others were doing—her teams below deck, the ones risking their lives to keep the *Bancroft* operational. But she knew the answers weren’t good. She could tell from the feedback and lag on the stick that several of their compartments were flooded. Everything was sluggish, which either meant the boat was heavier or they were dragging something. The images of her dead crew, of Oscar’s lifeless face, were emblazoned in her mind’s eye.

“No!” She shook her head.

“No, what?” Masters squirmed in her chair. “Did I miss—”

“Nothing! Just keep up. And, Masters, don’t overthink. Whatever happens, I need you to follow my lead.”

“What does that... never mind. Yes, ma’am!” Masters leaned closer to her screen, fighting the rear control sticks. She must be feeling the drag of the water they were taking on. It was growing worse by the second.

“We’ve got more explosions topside, Captain,” Adams began. “I

think whatever that light was, it's detonating the upper minefield we laid down."

"It doesn't matter." Kel squeezed the stick tighter and maneuvered the nose of the *Bancroft* past the final turn, revealing the vastness of the cavern beyond. Her camera went dark, so she flipped to LiDAR, watching as the active scans added layer after layer of detail.

Adams drew in an audible breath. "These explosions. Should we do something? I mean—"

"No! They don't matter," Kel interrupted, slamming the throttle to its limit and adjusting their dive to sixty-five degrees, their maximum dive angle. She didn't care about the consequences. There was only one thing she knew for certain. "Only the light matters."

"So we're talking about that strange light now, are we?" Doc Hansen asked. "Because I don't know what happened, but when it passed over me, I saw some strange shizit. My whole life... it flashed before my eyes."

"Right?" Masters shuddered and tweaked her controls into as tight a diving spin as she could manage. "And that ending? Fuuuuuuuckkk. I never thought I'd see Collins' ugly ass mug again."

Kel whipped her head sideways. "Collins? You saw Collins?"

"I saw him, too," Larsson said. "He and some other scraggly-looking blokes were standing around a bonfire, laughing it up. It was like a bad dream from Hades. You didn't see him, ma'am?"

She shook her head and returned her attention to her screen. "No. That's not what I saw. My visions were... far more lucid."

Life or death.

Light or dark.

Hers were cut and dry.

"Visions? As in plural?" Doc Hansen asked. She heard her feet shuffle closer. "I only saw one."

"Same," the others echoed.

Kel adjusted her controls and checked their descent. She had to

get their angle correct if they were going to hit the light. They were coming in too hot to nail an accurate spiraling approach.

“The cave-ins,” Adams said, “they’re getting worse, ma’am. I’m detecting dozens more explosions from above, with possible aftershocks. I think the cavern levels we passed through might be caving in, one on top of another. We seem to have set off a shitstorm with those ordinances. If that doesn’t kill us, then—”

“Shut up!” Kel tweaked the controls and brought the *Bancroft* wide, pulling the throttle back and applying the emergency brake. Once the drive spun down, she inverted the pump-jets’ rotation and eased it forward.

The boat groaned in response as the forces at play shifted. Any breaches they had were either being pushed shut or ripped open. But she couldn’t think about that. All that mattered was that they couldn’t be in a spiral when she did this. She needed to come at the pool of light straight on, or she could misjudge the approach.

“Where are you taking us?” Masters asked. She was probing her rather than trusting her.

Kel growled as she overlaid a grid on the feed from the nose camera to help her zero in on the undulating waves in the middle. “What did I say?”

“Just follow you.” Masters sighed.

“Then do it!” She inverted the pump-jets and slammed the throttle forward. Her screen flashed red, warning her of an invalid command. “Oh, come on!” She reached out and applied the emergency brake again. One couldn’t simply change the direction of the turbine without spinning it down first, and she knew it. Not unless you wanted to tear the entire thing asunder. Once the propeller shaft had lowered its rotation to an acceptable level, she released the brake and inverted the pump-jets once more. This time, there was no complaint. There was only the reluctant groaning of the *Bancroft* being forced against his gravitational will.

“Captain!” Adams said. “The countdown.”

The blasted timer! It had slipped her mind. Peering up at the

overhead display, the harsh truth stared back. Only thirty ticks remained. Their earlier detours had cost them dearly. Even with their rapid descent, they wouldn't make it in time.

Her mind raced. There was no way she'd misread that vision. It was as clear as day. While her gut may have been off in the past, she'd never been wrong. They'd made it this far and were still alive. She wasn't about to die. Not this way.

"Ma'am, the rocks." Adams shared a camera view on Kel's second display. "They're sliding out of the caverns about us."

Kel's eyes went wide. She could make out dust cascading downward from the minnow camera Masters had repositioned.

She pointed at her screen. "That's it!"

"What's it?" Adams asked.

"Parker, Marín! Target the opening. All available torpedoes. Fire at will."

"Yes, Captain. But I can't promise it won't cave-in on us." Parker readied the weapons. It was one of the few armaments they hadn't depleted.

"Just hold your tongue and do as you're ordered. We need to make up some time."

The back of her neck tingled. She could sense the eyes on her, but she didn't care. They could call her crazy later.

She checked their speed. While time seemed to be slowing to a crawl, they had another twenty, twenty-five seconds to claw back.

"Fire!"

"At what?" Marín pounded her fist against the wall.

Parker didn't hesitate. "Firing torpedo one!" He'd done as she asked and targeted the mouth of the cavern.

The familiar clang of the torpedo launcher echoed before they felt the vibrations that followed. Moments later, the deadly projectile arced upward toward the opening.

The countdown hit five seconds right as the initial remnants from the cave-in poured out of the cave entrance. Gravity propelled the rocks downward, and the debris was entering free fall when the

first torpedo exploded. Parker's timing had been impeccable.

The wave of stones disintegrated in a blast of yellow-orange light. What followed was a raining cloud of debris. From what she could tell, none of the particles that remained were bigger than a bowling ball.

When she returned her attention to the pool of light their boat was accelerating toward, it changed. One second it was a choppy, turbulent maelstrom, and the next it smoothed out, returning to a rhythmic, almost soothing pool of ripples.

Kel spun around to face Adams, who was intently studying the pulses on her controls. Although Kel suspected the time had shifted, she sought confirmation. But she wouldn't get the chance.

Her nose itched. It was her body's familiar tell that something was off. Except this wasn't someone lying. It was bigger. Far bigger. "Fire two!"

No one spoke.

No one questioned her.

The second clang and the subsequent vibrations followed, sending the bridge into an eerie silence until Adams broke it.

"I... I don't know how, but we gained ten seconds, Captain."

Murmurs spread among the others. They were confused how she'd known what to do.

Kel studied the clock and compared it to her estimates. It still wasn't enough time. Even if the torpedo did its thing, they needed more. She'd underestimated how long it would take them to recover the speed she'd siphoned by inverting the pump-jet. They had to cover the distance, and fast.

She ran her hand through her hair. Nothing she could think of would allow them to make up the lost time. Flooding the boat would only give them seconds, and that was unthinkable.

As if reading her mind, Larsson reached over her shoulder and pointed at her control panel. At first, she didn't see what he was pointing at, not until he moved his hand closer. His finger paused, hovering above the button to engage the supercavitating drive. He

was right. While the distance to the light was too short to enter the bubble, they could use the rocket thrusters. It could be exactly what they needed.

This was their last chance. The ultimate Hail Mary. At seven clicks of depth, if this didn't tear them apart, then nothing would.

Kel nodded. "Punch it!"

Larsson pressed his finger to the screen.

She wasn't sure if he'd hit the button until she heard the whine of the bubblers and felt the acceleration from the rockets driving them forward.

The *Bancroft* covered the distance to the pool of light in a third of the time it would have taken them at their regular speed. Kel kept her hands on the controls, doing her best to keep them centered. She didn't know how wide the entrance was.

The entrance. It was the first time she'd thought of it like that. What was on the other side was still only a figment of her imagination. A mirage in her mind's eye.

As they neared the light, the surface was bubbling over. And then she saw it. The sphere from earlier. At some point, it had stopped glowing. She wasn't sure how she'd missed it, but it was presently floating in the center of the swirling green vortex.

"We're... gonna crash!" Masters' voice cracked.

It was only then that she saw the tears in the coxswain's eyes. When she spun in her chair, she noticed everyone around her was crying. Everyone except Larsson. He'd been as certain as she was about their end goal. So certain that she'd lost sight of her people, the ones she'd sworn to protect.

Closing her eyes, she took a labored breath. "I'm sorry," she muttered.

"Keep it steady!" Larsson leaned over her shoulder and grasped the two control sticks, struggling to guide the *Bancroft* into the center of the haze of light, and straight at the jet-black sphere.

The collision couldn't be mistaken, even with her eyes closed. The unmistakable sound of crushing metal and carbon filled her

ears. She squeezed her eyes tight, waiting for the water to hit her, but it never came.

What followed could only be described as a blizzard. Every centimeter of her body was being pelted by snow. Shards of icy water. Not water. It was different. Almost soft.

When she opened her eyes, she was surrounded by a billowing cloud of white. The same white that was numbing her skin. And yet, she wasn't cold.

Maybe this was death. She'd heard it described as ascending into the light before. Never like snow, but maybe it was unique to everyone.

"Are we... dead?" she asked.

Her voice sounded different. It was missing the gravelly depth she'd developed over years of aging. Instead, it had a crisp edge of youth, like before the hormones of childbirth and menopause had torn her apart.

"Not in the least," a female voice replied, booming through the storm of white. "In fact, your lives have come full circle. You have found the rings I inscribed on the face of the deep."

Interlude

The Builders

Heworthy? Helios shook his head. “Do you really think they’re
“I do.” Willow sighed. She was tired of him wasting her time with these games. He’d been fighting her that entire descent through the portal, and had she not built in those fate failsafes, her lifemarks might have died.

He rubbed his fingers together, and a ball of flames shot toward the distant sun, starting the cycle to reset this fragment. While she still didn’t know how he was controlling this shard, they both knew that death was near the humans who were still on those planets.

As the flickering solar flame seemed to mirror in his eyes, he glanced over toward her. “Have they experienced any of the nine circles of hell yet?”

“Stop calling them that!” Willow stood up with a start, and the bench disappeared underneath them, sending Helios falling to the ground. “You’re so vain; you always have been.”

“Argh!” He reached down and rubbed his lower back. “These... bod-ies are so limiting.”

She stepped forward and plucked the ancient fragment out of space and slid it beneath her robes. Keeping it safe was her highest priority, especially after he’d seen them pass the test. “We stopped calling it the nine circles after your beloved Dante spoiled the surprise. His effects are still echoing through all of our fragments, especially the human ones. There were even residual reverberations

in this most recent instance.”

Helios floated upright, a smirk on his face. “Is that so? Did they—”

“Of course they picked up the symbolism, you daft fool.” Willow waved her hands, surrounding herself with a protective barrier. The wrath of a Builder interrupted was well known. “The Bible, while a useful tool to help humans through the dark ages, fails them later in their evolution. You and I both know they take it too literally and they befall the same fate over and over again in every fragment, never realizing their true potential. Rather than seeing the universe for what it is, they instead see God around every turn, questioning themselves into a slumber of unremarkable stagnation.”

“So, why repeat your tests?” Helios took a step toward her but failed to get closer. Her barrier ensured this. “I mean, if we’ve spoiled the viability of these dimensional fragments, why not start anew like the others have?”

“You know why; don’t play a fool. It’s not becoming of you.”

He laughed out loud, and his bellow shook the very thread of space and time. “Come now, let us roll some dice.” He pulled a pair of glowing cubes out of the folds of his sleeve. “If you roll greater than—”

Willow lowered her eyes and glared at him. “Stop!”

The vastness of time disappeared, and all that remained was the void of the aether. He was in her dimensional plane and under her control. While he may have forgotten, she had not.

“Gods don’t play dice.” She waved her hand, knocking the virtual dice through the black hole at the center of this shard.

Probably not her best move, but it worked.

His robes burst into flames, and his eyes grew to fill the space in front of her. She’d seen the all-seeing god personification before and was far from impressed. Like all the antics with the other Builders, Helios lacked imagination; he lacked vision. It was one of the many reasons she was doing this.

The colors of his shapeless mass changed from yellow to white.

“You will destroy these fragments and return to Mount—”

“I will not!” She snapped her fingers, and he disappeared.

Had he not stepped into her plane of existence, the effect would have failed. She’d tried to appease him, giving him a glimpse into her plans. But alas, he was as dense as the others. Make no mistake; there’d be consequences for banishing him she’d have to deal with later. Still, ousting him felt good.

As she reflected on his words, she couldn’t help but feel a tinge of doubt. Such emotions were uncommon for a Builder to experience. In the blink of an eye, it made her question everything she’d ever done. Every misstep and every failure seemed amplified. And while most might have folded under the pressure, to Willow, it was invigorating.

It meant that what she’d been working for was succeeding. It meant that if she was feeling for these lifemarks, then they might have the same effect on her familial members. Feelings were both a powerful deterrent and motivator when harnessed properly. Maybe they really would have a fighting chance against the rising darkness. The coming tests were the only way to know for sure.

Act IV

“In the universe, there are things that are known, and things that are unknown, and in between, there are doors.” — William Blake

Lifemarks

XO Oscar Allen



Averhead sun on a perfect spring afternoon. His fingers underneath tingled as he let the heat spread. It started out as a faint sensation but grew more vivid the longer he lay perfectly still. He'd always imagined death would be colder, especially after he'd drowned.

He rolled over at the thought and bumped his head against something hard. "Ouch!"

His eyes popped open, and he brought his hand up to rub the side of his head. There was an open grating panel next to him, and for some unknown reason, he was lying on the floor. This wasn't the purgatory he was expecting. In fact, it looked an awful lot like Engineering.

Someone to his left sniffled. "Did you say something?" It sounded like Cary, but he couldn't be certain.

"Ye—s." He cleared his throat and swallowed hard. His voice sounded different, less deep than he was used to. "How'd I end up on the ground like this? The last thing I remember..."

He bolted upright and spun around the room. The boat was quiet, too quiet. Gone were the beeps and the ever-present hum of the equipment. Strangest of all was the lack of noise from the air-conditioning systems. It was the one constant that kept moisture at bay in a boat as big as this. Even when the noisy reactor was working overtime, the ventilation system left in its wake a constant

ambient level of noise.

“Sir? You were... dead.” Cary scrambled up off the ground, taking several steps backward. “Is that... really... you?”

“Who the hell else would it be?” He leaned sideways, peering down the open grating and squinted.

All the water was gone, and the welds they’d made earlier weren’t visible. In fact, the boat was pristine. He didn’t see any signs of excess moisture or grime. It was like the *Bancroft* had just come off the assembly line, but even then, it had collected dirt along the way. Everyone knew a shipyard was as dirty as a dustbin.

Staring down, he shivered as the images of being submerged in the frigid water below replayed in his mind. Excruciating pain had coursed through his lungs when he’d been forced to breathe in the icy liquid. When he took his last breath, he stared across the sandy beach he assumed was hell.

“How long have I been out?” He pushed up onto one knee and straightened upright, rubbing his eye with the back of his hand. “It must have been a while for y’all to have cleaned up that mess.”

He lowered his hand and paused as he held it out in front of his face. It looked weird. The fingers and palm he was staring at weren’t his own—at least not for the past twenty-five years.

Cary took a few hesitant steps toward him, wiping at the tears in his eyes. “You see it too, don’t you?”

The skin on his hands and arms was smooth and youthful. It was missing the dozen or so scars he’d collected over the years. He used to call them his lifemarks. Like landmarks, which are the points of interest in an area you visited, lifemarks serve the same purpose for your body. You knew you hadn’t lived a full life if you hadn’t used your body to its fullest, and every so often, those life events left marks behind.

But something was wrong. He stared down at his other hand. It, too, had changed. When he glanced up at Cary, the dolphin was staring him up and down. The strange thing was, even he appeared different. He was already young, but if you’d asked him today, he’d

say the man wasn't a day over sixteen. In fact, he practically looked like a baby.

He shook his head and lurched forward, grabbing a handful of Cary's shirt and lifting him upward. "What've you done to me?" He raised his fist, attempting to put the dolphin off his guard. They must have drugged him or something.

"I... I didn't... do—" Cary began.

And then Oscar saw it. His face was reflecting in the mirror-like surface of the dormant computer screen. He froze and lowered Cary to the ground before taking several long strides around the corner into his personal quarters.

His door was cracked open, and he didn't pause to figure out why. He merely shoved it inward and pivoted left. When he flicked the light on, he drew in a breath and stumbled backward until his back smacked the wall.

Staring back at him in the mirror, he saw himself. Not his early-fifties self—the one with gray hair sprinkled through his temples and lines creasing his forehead like someone had dragged a rake across him.

The face staring back at him was his own, except he was no older than Cary. He looked like a clean-cut, twenty-something dolphin fresh out of the naval academy.

"How's this even possible?" he muttered, touching his youthful face.

Body Bag

Captain Kel Williams



The first thing Kel figured she would be covered in fine powder, standing in clouds, or maybe even surrounded with fire and brimstone. Instead, she woke up on the bridge, dressed, and surrounded by nothing but the whisper-quiet breathing of the crew around her.

She blinked several times, not quite feeling herself. The pain in her hip was gone, as was the ever-present throbbing in her head. All her ailments had vanished. When she reached up and touched the back of her head, the bump and stitches from when she'd fallen and hit the hatch were healed. As she moved her fingers around her scalp, there was no mistaking that her hair was different as well. It was longer than she usually wore it, and it felt... fuller.

"Blimey?" she muttered.

She brought her hand down, half-expecting it to be covered in something foreign. It was the only thing that explained how her head felt. But she did a double take when her fingers came into view.

Her skin was pristine and youthful, almost childlike. She could be staring at a sixteen-year-old's hand. And her nails, they'd changed too. They'd grown far longer than her normally close-cut cuticle trimming, and strangest of all, her age lines were missing.

Whatever had happened to them, passing through that pool of light had altered her appearance. Her memory seemed to be intact,

though. Not that she'd know if she'd forgotten anything. But the entire sequence of events leading up to their collision with the sphere was right there at her fingertips. Like it'd just happened.

When she glanced to the right, she recoiled and raised her hand to her mouth. Masters was sleeping perfectly still beside her in her chair. While her eyes were closed, her face had changed. She looked unusually peaceful.

The American always maintained a posture that left a stern expression on her face. People used to think she was angry all the time, at least until they took the time to get to know her. The only way she was taken seriously was when she turned on her inner badass; and to her, that meant flipping on an unfriendly, almost stony, physical appearance. The tattoos along her neckline and up and down her arms only reinforced the effect.

The woman sitting motionless next to her, however, was someone different. She could've been the girl next door. Her rosy cheeks, pristinely clean skin, and shoulder-length bob added to the allure. If she hadn't seen pictures of her as a kid, she might think Masters was someone else.

Kel leaned over and held her hand in front of Masters' face. She was still breathing. That was good.

As she went to move, a blood-curdling scream burst forward from the aft segment of the boat.

"Ahhhhh!"

She didn't hesitate. Kel shot up and out of her chair and sprinted aft. After her first few steps, she leapt up and over a body on the ground. While she wasn't certain, she was pretty sure it was Larsson. The dolphin looked exactly the same, but he'd always had boyish good looks.

By the time she made it ten meters, voices were stirring behind her at the controls. Whoever screamed had roused the others. While she'd love to be there to discuss what they were experiencing, she wanted to know who was making all the racket and why.

Working her way past her and Collins' quarters, she passed into

Medical and saw a woman standing at the entrance to their examination room. Judging by the jet-black hair woven in tight Bantu knots, it could only be one person.

“Doc! Is that you?” Kel slid to a stop behind her.

Doc Hansen jumped sideways into the room and crashed into the cabinet. “Crikey! You scared me, Captain. Don’t do th—” Her eyes went wide, and she reached back, grasping around the counter for something until she turned up with a knee-reflex hammer. “Who the hell are you?”

“It’s me, Kel.” She brought her hand to her chest. “I’d ask you the same thing, but your hair’s a dead giveaway.”

She tilted her head and squinted. “What are you on about?”

Kel stepped forward and raised her hand, turning Ellen’s head to the side to look at the mirror just inside the door.

“Holy...” Doc Hansen ran her hand all along her face, down her neck, and stopped at her breast. She squeezed her left bosom and drew in a breath.

“What’s the matter?” Kel asked.

“They’re... real.” Doc Hansen moved her hand to her other bosom and squeezed again. “Both of them. This doesn’t make any sense. I...,” she swallowed hard, “had them removed a few years ago. Bugger cancer,” she muttered.

“I know, right? I don’t know about you, but I feel like a million euros.” Kel reached up and mussed with her full head of hair. “Whatever that portal did, it’s almost like it gave us a factory reset. Either that, or this is all poppycock and we’re pushing up daisies.”

“Portal?” Doc Hansen muttered.

That gave Kel an idea. She unbuttoned her trousers and eased them down over her hips.

Doc Hansen drew back against the cabinet and furrowed her brow. “What are you—”

“Checking for my birthmark,” Kel interrupted. As her trousers lowered past her knee, she noticed them. The three familiar dark brown splotches on her upper calf. They’d been there since she was

born and she'd never encountered anyone with the same pattern in that spot.

She ran her hands over them and pressed harder. Her skin felt real to the touch, as real as anything else she'd ever felt.

"Trio of circular splotches, check!" She hoisted her trousers and tucked her shirt back in. "So, what got you all riled up back here if it wasn't seeing your reflection?"

Doc Hansen had returned to staring at herself in the mirror and had moved on to her stomach. It looked like she had a collection of dark brown dots in a pattern, probably like Kel's. When she ran her hand over them, she glanced sideways, shaking her head. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"I said, what had you so spooked?" Kel searched the room. The only thing in sight was a black bag laid out on the table. The zipper was drawn back, and the end of the bag was bunched up. Like someone had pulled something out of it.

"It was empty when I came in here." Doc Hansen spun around and walked up to the bag and lifted the edge, peering inside. "I... don't understand. He's gone."

Kel squinted. "He, who?"

And then it hit her who she meant, like a bowling ball to the stomach.

Doc Hansen slid her hand up and down the bag like she was searching for something inside. "I don't know where he went, but he was in here earlier." Her hand froze when she hit the far side of the bag. She grasped something and slowly pulled it out.

As her hand exited the black fabric casket, she was holding a tag. A body tag. On it was scrawled his name.

Thomas Collins

Deceased 11/21/2055

Kel took a deep breath as adrenaline coursed through her veins. The shot of energy was exhilarating. Like she could strangle the

man with her bare hands. Everything they'd experienced, everything they'd lost, started and ended with Collins. And now, he was loose on her boat. This was happening. The git was still alive. She could feel it. While she hadn't been the one lucky enough to kill him the first time, she'd make damn sure she got her chance on the rebound.

She took a step toward the medical cabinet and yanked open the top drawer. Reaching inside, she pulled out a blue sterile retractable scalpel and slid the blade up, clicking it into place. The shiny steel knife glittered in the overhead light.

"What are you doing?" Doc Hansen asked.

"I'm not gonna stand around." Kel pocketed the closed blade and took two more out of the drawer. "This time, I'm going to sort the bloody turncoat myself when I find him." She offered one of the blades to the doc. "Fancy a bit of a hunt?"

Doc Hansen didn't hesitate. "Count me in!" She snatched the blade, sliding it out of its sheath, and then back in again. "Lead the way, Captain." She raised her hand up and gestured toward the exit.

Kel smirked. There was a first time for everything in a new body, even killing.

Cornucopia of Relics

XO Oscar Allen



Bcomputers in Engineering. When he hit the keyboard, nothing happened, and the monitors wouldn't power on, either. Stranger still, the overhead lights were on. The only way that could happen was if they were running off batteries. That meant the reactor was offline, which was impossible. Reactors don't go offline on new boats.

"What is it?" Cary asked. "What's going on?"

Oscar shook his head. "I... don't know."

He sidestepped past the dolphin and worked his way through the nearby hatch into the aft segment, heading deeper into the boat. He needed to check the reactor.

The footsteps behind him confirmed Cary was close. As he passed by the launch tubes and trash compactor, he entered the reactor room. Except for the faint sound of the boat rocking in the water, the room was silent—an impossibility for a submarine like this. Once a reactor was turned on, it stayed in service until the boat was decommissioned or needed replacement.

"That's strange." Cary hesitantly reached out and rested his hand against the wall of the reactor compartment.

"Tell me about it." Oscar came around to the computer and hit the keys, but it was shutoff. "We... should be dead."

"Oh, right. That." Cary pulled his hand back and stepped up

beside him.

Oscar squinted at the man-child. "What were you talking about?"

Cary shook his head. "Nothing, sir. I just... hadn't heard waves against the hull in months. Not since we pushed off from HMNB *Clyde*."

"Waves," Oscar muttered. If they were hearing waves, that meant only one thing. "Bloody hell!"

He spun in place and pushed Cary off to the side as he began sprinting through the boat. One by one, he leapt over the hatch thresholds until he came to the ladders, at which point he climbed. He flew up the ladder to the third level, fluidly passing from rung to rung like the bars were extensions of his body. Once he hopped off at the top, he turned aft again and headed back one compartment before screeching to a halt.

Up ahead was a bright patch of light on the ground. It wasn't the familiar overhead glow of the LEDs they'd grown accustomed to in the boat. This was honest-to-goodness sunlight. As he took a few tentative steps toward it, the pitter-patter of feet running up behind him meant Cary had finally arrived.

When he turned to look at the panting dolphin, his body went rigid. The sound of seagulls echoed through the compartment. Their familiar squawk was ingrained in any sailor's mind. They were the rats of the sky, and frequented every boat he'd ever sailed on.

Cary inhaled sharply. "Bollocks!"

The dolphin went to step around Oscar, but he reached out and stopped him. "No. Let me go first."

"Yessir," Cary muttered.

Oscar turned back toward the light and continued onward. When he arrived at the base of the ladder, he craned his neck to get a better look out the hatch. There, about four meters overhead, was an ocean of deep blue sky filled with sunlight.

He stared upward and flinched when the beak of a black seagull came into view, followed by the rest of its body. The vile bird

stepped up to the edge of the hatch and peered down at them, turning its beak from side to side. A moment later, it tilted its head and let out a bellowing cry that echoed through the metallic innards of the *Bancroft*. “Well, I’ll be a feathered football.”

When he reached up to grab a ladder rung, Cary tapped him on the shoulder. “You might want to bring these, sir.”

Oscar turned to look at him. He was holding a flare gun in one hand and a crowbar in the other. He must have grabbed them from the emergency receptacle near the ladder on his way up. The flare was useless inside a submarine, but they were always positioned by an external access hatch. You never knew when you’d need to signal another boat. Plus, they had a searing punch when you fired them directly at someone.

He reached over and grasped the crowbar. “I need you to follow me up top.” He peered at him and then eyed the flare gun. “You carry that thing. And Cary, stay close and follow my lead.”

Cary nodded and flipped the gun open, dropping a flare cartridge from his pocket into the empty chamber. Once closed, he looked up. “Let’s do it.”

Oscar bounced the crowbar up and down in his hand. It was as light as a feather. Hours earlier, he could barely hold a sandwich, but now he had the strength of a god. It must be this younger body he was in. That, or the liters of adrenaline coursing through his veins. Either way, he hoped he was ready for whatever they found topside.

Taking a deep breath, he stared up into the face of the seagull eyeing them, hoping they had food. He reached up and grabbed for the rung just over his head and started climbing. One rung after another, he made short work of the climb to the lip of the hatch. He could hear Cary clambering up the rungs below.

As he came up to the edge, the bird didn’t move. It merely stood there, as if it had never seen a human before, let alone one coming out of a long, tubular object in the water.

“Shoo,” he muttered, waving the crowbar in the air.

The massive, obsidian bird hopped over the swinging metal bar and then started flapping its wings. He paused and tilted his head. It was only then that he noticed the bird's wingspan. Unfolded, it was over a meter wide and the most beautiful purple-black color he'd ever set eyes on. He'd seen countless dirty-white or black seagulls in his time. This one was different, though. Maybe it wasn't a seagull after all.

With the bird now receding into the distance, he clambered up and hopped out onto the exterior of the *Bancroft*, being careful not to slip off the side. There weren't exactly safety railings on the outside of a submarine, especially one without a fairwater.

When he stood upright, he drew in a breath, and his legs buckled a little as he panned over the scene before him. Where he expected to see a field of infinite blue in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, he was staring instead at a beautiful, palm-tree-lined, tropical beach. The *Bancroft* had somehow found its way to the shores of an island and had run aground.

It took him a minute to take in the scene. In the distance, a few clicks away, he could make out what looked like a volcano and the top edge of some type of ruins nearby. That, or a strange rock formation. As he panned around the shoreline, he froze, and a wave of déjà vu hit.

"What the—?" He squinted. He'd seen this place before, in his vision below deck. When he was drowning.

"What do you see?" Cary asked, as he continued to work his way up to the lip of the escape hatch.

"I... don't know." And he didn't. As far as the eye could see were broken-down machines: planes, helicopters, and all forms of boats lying perfectly still on a beach. From personal yachts to canoes, to massive shipping boats with dozens of crane-like arms, and what he would say were pirate ships if he'd ever seen one in real life. Laid out before him was a cornucopia of relics. If asked, he could only describe it as some form of museum wasteland or historical reenactment. Of what, he had no idea.

Cary pulled himself topside out of the hatch and then straightened up. “Holy crap! It’s the USS *Proteus*.”

Oscar leaned closer to see where Cary was looking. “Wait. I thought we left the *Proteus* back at the bottom of that Trench.”

“Not that *Proteus*, sir. That’s a class of mini-submarine. This is the USS *Proteus*.” Cary closed his eyes and made a sign of the cross over his body. “They were lost at sea in... 1940 or ’41 if I remember right.”

“How... do you know that?” He’d never heard of the USS *Proteus* before. Then again, he wasn’t much into ancient history.

Cary pointed at each of the crane-like contraptions along the port side. “Those are for loading and unloading coal. She was a naval collier and a transport ship assigned to hauling soldiers, coal, and oil for the Atlantic Fleet in the mid-1910s. After she was decommissioned, she was sold to the Canadian Merchant Navy. Then around 1940, she just disappeared, facing a similar fate to that of her sister ships, the *Cyclops* and *Nereus*.” He craned his neck and tried to peer around the massive boat, which appeared to have run aground even further offshore than they had. “Maybe they’re here, as well.”

“Where exactly is here?” Oscar continued scanning the scene, taking it all in. The air was fresh, and he could feel his body relax after each breath. It was a far cry from the stale, processed gas circulating through the *Bancroft*. Unless he was mistaken, there was a hint of hibiscus mixed in with the salty breeze.

It wasn’t until he focused further along the horizon and skyward that he noticed something even more strange than the scene of historic vessels lining the shore. Maybe his eyes were playing tricks on him. Then again, he’d just come back from being dead, so anything was possible.

He pointed at the horizon. “Is that an illusion, or is the world... arcing upward?”

Cary spun around and squinted, but he didn’t have a chance to reply.

“What year are thou from?” a distant voice called out.

Oscar flinched and glanced to his right, toward the aft end of the boat. No one was there.

“Over here!” the voice said again.

He turned further around and immediately saw the source of the query. In front of them was a short, rotund man wading in the water near the shore. He was wearing an odd khaki, domed safari hat with a matching jacket and shorts.

“What year art thou from?” the man repeated. His head swiveled left and right, as if he were expecting someone to jump out at him.

“Who are you?” Oscar walked forward, stepping around the ladder to below deck. He ignored the strange question, preferring instead to get details before he gave any himself.

“The bloke answereth a question with a question.” The man shook his head, jotting something into a small notebook. After what seemed like a minute of writing or sketching, he glanced up. “Name’s George, George Bass. Now then, wouldst thou answer mine query? What year be—”

“Twenty fifty-five,” Cary interrupted.

Oscar turned back toward him. What part of follow his lead didn’t he understand? “What are you—”

Cary ignored him. “Are you really George Bass? *Thee* George Bass?”

George glanced up, eyeing him over his notebook. “I’m sure there are others, mine sirrah. But aye. Why?” He tilted his head. “Knowest thou me?”

“If you’re George Bass,” Cary stepped around Oscar, “then what was the name of your boat? The one you... disappeared on?”

“Who is this guy?” Oscar whispered.

“The Venus,” George pointed down the shore. “She’s the one flying the Spanish flag. Or at least what remaineth of it. The nutter Americans tried tearing it off yon other night. Methinks they still can’t quite bear losing their nineteen-sixties reality.”

Cary stepped backward alongside Oscar and cupped his hand.

“He was an explorer who was lost in eighteen-o-three, supposedly on his way toward Chile.”

Oscar raised his eyebrows. “How do you know all this?”

“You kill time at night tinkering; I kill time reading, sir. I’ve always been a fan of conspiracy theories and sailing.” Cary lowered his hand and pointed out along the horizon at the scene of relics. “Unless I’m mistaken, what we’ve got here is a literal who’s who of history’s missing.”

Oscar stared at the sea of hardware and reached down, rubbing his hands together. Even though the stitches were gone, their phantom tingling remained. Whatever this place was, it wasn’t normal, and neither was he.

“Hast thou a net or aught that I may use to ascend yon?” George asked.

Cary started aft, toward where they housed the cargo net.

Oscar grabbed his arm and stopped him. “Hold your horses, dolphin. Let’s not compromise our security with the first person we meet.”

“But...” Cary glanced back at George, who was now working his way deeper into the water. “Yessir.”

“I’m not sure we’re keen on that just yet.” Oscar turned to face George. While the hat seemed silly at first, in the sweltering heat of the overhead sun it looked downright pleasant. He reached up and rubbed the sweat off his brow.

“Suit thyself.” George stopped approaching them when the water was about chest-deep. “I reckoned thou chaps wouldn’t have issue, seeing as one of thy crew was already ashore.”

Oscar caught his breath and tilted his head. “One of our crew?”

“Why, verily.” George took off the hat and then scooped a handful of water into it; he assumed to keep it cool. “A few minutes post thou didst traverse the stepped portal from thy time, a gentleman sprang forth from yon hatch.” He gestured toward the hole where they’d both exited from with his pencil.

He didn’t know what portal George was talking about. Kel must

have passed through something near the signal at the bottom of the cave system they were diving through. What concerned him more, though, was the person who'd apparently already left the *Bancroft*.

"This gentleman." Oscar knelt down to get a closer look at George. "Did you see what he looked like?"

"Sure as the starless welkin at night." George put his pencil-and-paper pad into a small pouch and then slid them into a fabric recess in the hat before donning it. He smiled.

"What the heck is a welkin?" Cary asked.

"Thou knowest." George pointed skyward. "The points of light in the welkin. We did call them lost souls in mine time. Howbeit, we have them not hither. The man, though, donned a high-neck shirt, much akin to thine own, save his was the hue of sand. Like mine skin, but darker."

Oscar's heart skipped a beat, and he tightened his grip on the crowbar. He knew exactly who the man was referring to. It was Collins. Like him, he'd died on the other side of the portal and must have been healed while passing through.

He glanced over toward Cary. "Why don't you toss down the cargo net for our new friend?" He stood up. "I've got a few more questions that need answering."

From Mars, With Blood

Captain Kel Williams



The fake was firm and a bead of sweat was trickling down her forehead. She savored the moment, closing her eyes to fully absorb the heat that she thought she'd never feel again. It was like a kiss from a long-lost friend, intense yet comforting, a vivid reminder of a world outside her enclosed existence beneath the waves. The longer she stood there, the more she realized she needed some sunscreen. If she didn't lather up soon, she'd be as red as a lobster tonight.

"Where on Earth is this place?" Kel opened her eyes and fidgeted with the knife in her pocket. She'd nearly collided into Cary sprinting through the boat. He pretty much dragged her topside after that, mumbling some nonsense about how they'd surfaced and were one of hundreds of vessels on a tropical beach or something. She was about to have the doctor subdue him until she glimpsed the sunlight for herself.

"We dub it Aqua," George said, staring at the bar of chocolate in his hand as if it were a gift from the gods. They'd given it to him as an act of good faith. When he broke off a small piece and set it on his tongue, he closed his eyes, relishing the flavor.

"Is the entire surface covered in water?" Oscar studied the man intently.

Her XO had been standoffish with her since she'd come topside.

She didn't know why, but given their situation, his emotions were probably as messed up as hers. Like the others, his physique had reset to his late teenage self. She almost didn't recognize him under all those muscles. He looked even stronger than when she first met him all those years ago.

George shrugged and swallowed. "Beats me. We've not ventured far ourselves." He opened his eyes and narrowed his gaze at Kel. "Whosoever hath left yon island returned not."

She glanced at Oscar, and he raised an eyebrow. "What's the next move then?"

George popped another piece of chocolate in his mouth and shuddered. "Methought thou said she was at the helm?" He was staring at Oscar.

"I am the captain of this boat." Kel snatched the chocolate from his lap and broke off a chunk of her own before tossing it back. "That doesn't mean I don't confer with my people. We're not exactly in familiar territory, if you catch my drift."

She took a bite. It tasted marvelous. She hadn't eaten in forever, and the idea of rationing foodstuff was the last thing on her mind. At that moment, she had only one goal.

Kel looked back down at George, and their eyes locked. "Which way did you say our dead man walked?"

"Thy corpse?" George asked.

"Yes."

"How long was he amongst the departed?"

She squinted. "I don't know, perhaps a day, maybe a bit more. Does it really matter?"

"By hearsay, nay." George folded up the chocolate bar and tucked it into his pocket. He then pushed up off the metal surface and stood straight. "Yet, observing mine sailors who met their end ere and closer to our portal's passage, their memories did vanish. Poof! Disappeared." He gestured outward with his hands. "Seemeth if thou wert living, thou retained 'em; yet if thou departed, reset to thy body's age they were."

“Exactly how long have you been here?” Doc Hansen had her arms crossed tightly across her chest. Kel could tell she was palming a knife. The woman wasn’t taking a chance with anyone.

George reached toward his hat, and the doctor flinched.

“Apologies, mine lady.” George nodded and slowly reached into his hat to retrieve a pouch. “I was but perusing mine notes.”

He pulled a pad from the crude cloth protection and then flipped back a page, making note of the time. Reaching into his pocket, he retrieved a wristwatch—something he should be wearing and not at all from his era.

“Where’d you pick that up?” Kel held her hand out.

He stared at her for a few seconds before slowly placing the device in her hand.

“I bartered it for a crate of pineapple, unto the captain of the USS *Proteus*.” He leaned against one of the *Bancroft*’s tail fins. “A hankering for the fruit’s sour sweetness he did possess.”

She turned it over in her hand. It was a Longines, one of the earliest models of wristwatches and capable of keeping precise time across centuries. This one looked like it was brand new. She handed it back to him.

He compared the time on the watch with what he’d written down. “I’ve sojourned hither some three hundred and twelve days. Time, thou seest, flows not the same on Aqua. By mine reckoning, thou hast been hither eight hours and twenty-five minutes. Lest mine maths be wrong, that would be...” He scratched a few numbers on his paper for a second and then glanced up. “Nigh unto three months of thy time.”

His words sank in and she swallowed hard. Three months. They’d been unconscious for three months—all in the time it took for a good night’s sleep. Her mind wandered to Henry and June, her children. She wondered where they were. And then it hit her like a torpedo to the chest: They were probably dead, along with the rest of the planet. A nuclear winter doesn’t discriminate. Both lived in major cities, which meant their probability of survival was damn

near zero.

Images of their painful, screaming faces flashed through her mind's eye, and she fought to hold back tears. The weight of the thought crushed her, making it hard to breathe, as if the gravity of this place were pressing against her chest.

She'd failed to do her job.

She'd failed to protect them. All of them.

"Are you okay?" Oscar reached out and rested his hand on her arm.

She nodded, coming out of her emotional cloud and pushing her personal apocalypse to the back of her mind; there were lives still under her command, and that had to be enough for now.

"I'm as right as rain." She glanced up, suddenly feeling the weight of the crew's stares. "Why?"

He reached over and wrapped his other hand around hers, easing the scalpel blade closed. She hadn't even realized she'd drawn it.

"Apologies," she muttered, sliding the knife into her pocket and taking a deep breath. "XO Allen, the *Bancroft* is yours. Officer Zucca and Cary, you're with me." She stepped forward, weaving her way through the crowd of onlookers toward the end of the boat that had run aground, her two trusty dolphins close behind.

"Wait! Captain... where are you going?" Oscar took a step to follow her.

"To take care of loose ends."

As she made her way forward, a white light exploded beneath the water off the side of the boat. It radiated outward, igniting everything in the vicinity with a heavenly glow. She brought her hand up to block the glare, and then she froze. Something had appeared in the center of the expanding halo.

Once her eyes adjusted, the water at the center of the passing light was crystal clear. It was as if they were staring through a window to the bottom, except she wasn't seeing a sandbar. Below the surface, she could make out the outline of a few dozen human

bodies. Judging by the movement of their arms and legs, they were either swimming or treading water on the far side of the glowing portal entrance.

Her eyes darted from one body to another, until suddenly, one of them started sinking. They were struggling to make progress, but appeared to be swimming feet first toward the light. It was only then that Kel realized the person was wearing a suit of some kind. From the looks of it, they were donning a spacesuit, like those worn on the Moon and Mars. While she'd seen them countless times on the news over the past twenty years, she'd never seen one up close before.

Kel waved her hands in the air and shouted at the figures. "Stay back! Stay on your side!"

The person closest to them hesitated, seemingly confused by her words. They paused to tread water, then glanced upward. Several other suited figures were descending toward them. Once they saw this, the person flipped over and started swimming in earnest toward the portal.

"Why?" She shook her head. They didn't know any better and must have seen the shimmering object as some type of discovery, not the end of everything they held dear.

She stepped to the edge of the boat where it dropped off and plopped down on her butt.

"Ma'am?" Cary asked, eyeing her.

"We're not about to let them drown, are we?" Kel pushed off and slid down the surface of the *Bancroft* like a slide on a playground.

When she hit the water, she gasped for air and shot to the surface. "Wowza!" It was far colder than she'd imagined, especially given how hot she'd been up on the boat. Once she caught her breath, she didn't waste another second. She lined up with the glowing light and started swimming toward it.

Coming up on five meters out, she raised her arm over her head in a freestyle stroke and crashed her fist into an unseen barrier.

“Ouch!” She winced, treading water and shaking her hand to soothe the sting. After the pain subsided, she reached out and tentatively pushed against the invisible surface. “What the...?”

“Thou canst not traverse yon portal in reverse,” George yelled from the boat. “Await them thou must to pass ere lending aid. Of their own will thy must be.”

Now he tells her. She kicked and moved her arms, treading water as she watched the figures on the far side move closer. It wasn’t until she got close that she realized how far away they must have been. The water was distorting the distance, or the portal was magnifying it.

When the first person on the far side reached the light, her world flashed. From her point of view, everything seemed to freeze in an instant. The water was motionless, her breathing stopped, and no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t move a muscle. A second later, everything started moving freely again, as if it’d never stopped. Only now, there was an additional body on their side of the portal. The effect repeated a half dozen or so more times as each person passed through, until the light finally extinguished and the surface of the water was no longer transparent.

Kel stared out over the familiar rise and fall of the waves, expecting to see the people break the surface at any moment. But they never appeared. Dipping her head under the waves, she opened her eyes to see why. Their bodies were each lying on the sandbar below, their hands wrapped around their necks.

She flipped her head out of the water and pivoted in place toward the others. “They’re out of air! Dive in, you lot! We’ve got lives to save.”

Without thinking twice, she turned and dove downward. She’d had enough training to know that seconds without oxygen often meant the difference between life and death. And as far as she knew, they’d already been running low on the other side.

When she reached the first person about four meters down, the pressure on her lungs was almost unbearable. She wasn’t used to

swimming clothed, let alone with adrenaline coursing through her veins. Preservation of one's self was the furthest thing from her mind.

As she grabbed the suit of the nearest limp form, she pulled them close. Once she wrapped her arm around their helmet, she pushed off with everything she had. On her way up, she narrowly dodged Cary. He was making his way downward.

She kicked her feet over and over, pushing every muscle in her new body to its limit. Her free hand stretched up and swung wide, doing all she could to push the water down and reach the surface. Her lungs were bursting, but she wasn't going to fail this person. Not this time. Not again.

Her hand broke the surface first, and the warm air willed her arm downward, launching her toward her next breath. As she broke through, she tugged the body upward. At first, she thought she might have damaged the suit. But when she saw the face of the figure inside, she realized they were gasping for air just like her.

Kel struggled to tread water and find the latch of the helmet. She had no idea where the release was, and the longer she failed to find it, the more she could feel herself and the suit sinking.

"Oi! I could use a hand over here!" She twisted around, searching for someone, anyone. It wasn't until something bumped against her side that she flipped back. She did a double take, not recognizing who it was at first. It took her a second to realize it was Oscar treading water next to her. He had his hand around the suited person's waist, and he was attempting to float them on their back.

She didn't waste any more time. She started running her fingers along the edge of the helmet under the water and came up empty. It wasn't until she moved around to the front and hit their neck that she found what she was looking for. She'd been expecting a lever, when in fact, it was a dial of sorts. She reached her fingers into the indentation and grasped the handle, turning it counterclockwise and hoping the designer had followed the righty-tighty, lefty-loosey rule. Fortunately, they had.

The suit hissed, and the water bubbled around them as both the air and liquid from outside rushed in. With the person inside gasping for breath, they started fighting the onrush of water around their head. The suit was getting heavier by the second, but it wasn't until it started sinking that Kel's eyes widened. She locked her gaze with Oscar.

"They're too heavy!" She pulled on the neck of the suit, trying to keep it above water. "They're sinking. We need to head for the shore!" She kicked off and craned her neck, searching for the shoreline.

"Wait!" Oscar tugged against her. "The *Bancroft*. It's closer."

She was too tired to second-guess him. Her only hope was that the other dolphins were there, ready to help them.

The suit was like lugging a ton of bricks. It'd been years since she'd performed this type of life-saving exercise, and they'd certainly never done it with a spacesuit before.

They reached the boat faster than she'd expected. Only when she had her hand locked into the netting her people had lowered did she realize Parker had also been helping them pull the body through the water. Both he and Oscar had grabbed the netting just as a rope came sailing down toward them.

She glanced upward and saw a contingent of dolphins manning the rig lines. Oscar wrapped the looped end of the closest line over the head and under the arms of the spacesuit. Once it was in position, he waved his hand in the air, too tired to yell.

The crew was ready, though. They saw the signal and started pulling, being careful not to yank too hard and crush the chest of the person in the suit.

Kel paused to catch her breath and then climbed the other nearby net resting in the water. She made short work of it. One of the advantages of having a younger body was that it adapted faster, even under stress like this. When she reached the top, she hopped up and clambered over to the suited figure.

Doc Hansen was already there, ripping off the spacesuit and

struggling to help the person inside. When they both managed to lift the top half up and over the head of the suit's occupant, Kel gasped and reeled backward.

The person who she'd thought was a woman, based on their eyes alone, was, in fact, a young man. He couldn't have been any older than thirteen. He was tall and chunky for his age, but not overly so. The suit had made him look far older.

"Is he..." Her voice trailed off. She wasn't sure if it was because he was a child or because his eyes reminded her of Henry. Their deep blue hue was like staring into the depths of the ocean.

Doc Hansen brought her hands to the boy's neck and felt for a pulse. She nodded and held up her wristwatch. After a few seconds, she lowered it. "He's elevated but healthy. I have no idea why he's not awake."

"Tis commonplace." George walked up beside them and stared down at the boy. "Hours or days it may take for one to awaken. Yea, in some cases, a reset doth fail utterly."

Kel stood up and surveyed the people in the water. Her dolphins were hard at work. They'd pulled up seven bodies so far, and two others were already topside on the *Bancroft*. When she walked over to them, she paused and swallowed hard. They were both young girls, at least as old as the first boy.

"Check this out." Oscar lifted one of the breastplates from the recovered suits off the ground. He ran his hands along the lettering on the front. There was the icon of Mars printed on it, along with the EUUSSF logo for the European Union and United States Space Forces.

She shook her head. "What the bloody hell were they doing swimming in a cavern of water on Mars?"

Oscar tossed the piece of suit down. "I don't know, but we'll find out soon enough."

Her crew were pulling up two more suited figures. Judging by their height and girth, they were adults. It was obvious now that she could see the difference in suits. But prior to having seen these,

she'd totally have misjudged them even above water.

"I think this one's dead," Larsson said. He was treading water down by the netting, waiting for them to finish lugging one of the other adults.

Kel squinted and studied the suit. It looked like maybe it had water inside. "Why'd you reckon that?"

They rolled the body over, and as their backside surfaced, she winced, along with several others nearby. The rear of the suit was cut open, and she could see the organs inside their body spilling out. She raised her hand to her mouth and looked away from the gore, and only then did she realize the suited body was too short. They appeared to be missing their feet.

"Snared by the sealing portal." George had closed his eyes and turned his back to the scene. "'Tis rare, yet seen it have I. Nay measure of reset can mend them."

She took a deep breath. This world was alien, and far stranger than anything she'd ever experienced. While she thought she'd been ready to enact her revenge on Collins, she needed to slow down. She had no idea what messed-up stuff she'd run into once she was on that shore. Only one person knew that.

When she checked over the scene, she saw that her crew had the other bodies well in hand. She turned and faced their new friend.

"Say, George. Do you fancy joining us for some dinner below deck?" Kel tilted her head sideways. "We have towels inside to dry off, and Chef Zucca here makes a mean stew."

His eyes shot open. "With meat true and genuine?"

Gianna stepped up beside Kel and locked gazes for a moment. She squinted, as if struggling to read her mind, before finally nodding. "Best beef the navy offers. We even have fresh potatoes and veggies."

"Well, call me a calf's uncle. Bid me not twice thou need'st." He spun around. "Whither is the ladder?"

Kel guided him aft, toward the one hatch they'd already opened. The others would remain sealed tight for the time being. There was

no point in giving away their secrets any sooner than they had to. Only one person had left their boat, and if George was right, he was clueless about the *Bancroft*.

She paused next to Marín and leaned in close to her ear. “I want four people on duty. Put them up here on the surface and have them change shifts every four hours throughout the night. Full tactical gear with night vision. Nothing touches this boat. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Captain!” Marín saluted her. “If they attempt to board, should we...” She swallowed hard.

Kel nodded. “Your orders are to fire one, and only one, warning shot. After that, you shoot to kill. Is that clear?”

“Crystal, ma’am.” Marín turned and made her way forward to find her first shift.

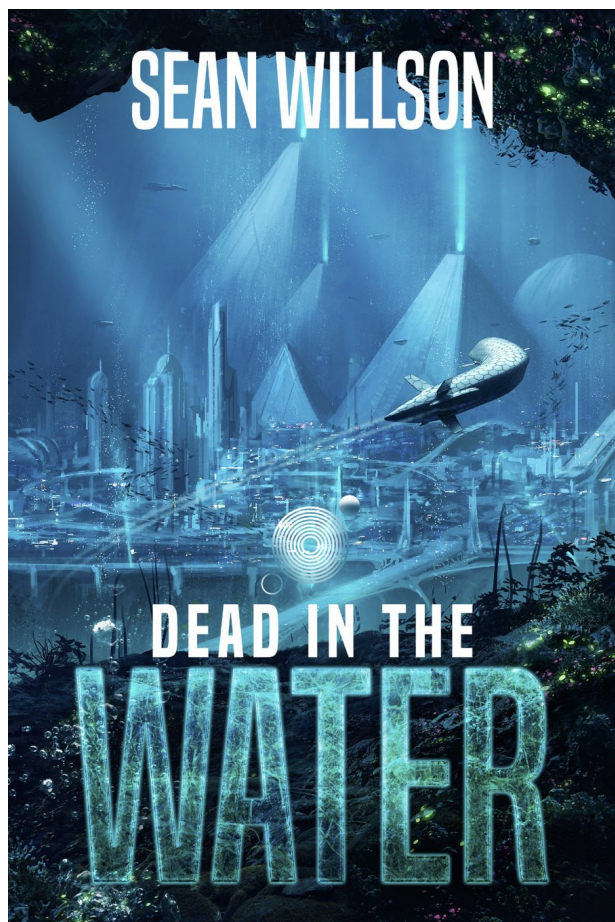
She watched her go and turned, double-timing it to catch up with the others. Their boat had just shy of five months of food to survive, assuming they couldn’t scrounge anything from ashore. There was no rush to disembark before they needed to. She had a lot to learn about this new world before she made her next move.

Her mind had already started its usual game of planning too far ahead. But one idea kept bubbling to the surface.

If there was a portal to reach this place, perhaps there was another that would take them somewhere else. Or, better yet, back in time to fix the mess she’d created.

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About the Author

From the moment I turned ten, the worlds of science fiction held me captive. I was the kid whose eyes were always hidden behind a thick tome, wandering amidst the stars, even as I sat in the back of the family car on a long drive. While some kids dreamed of becoming astronauts or engineers, I dreamt of both—but on faraway planets, amidst societies governed by mind-bending technologies and philosophies.

Ironically, I began my journey in the world of Computer Engineering, designing the software that run through digital veins of our modern society. Yet the pull of those far-off galaxies was relentless. Amidst bustling airports and hotel rooms of my travels, the story of the **Dark Nebula** series began to take shape in stolen moments during business trips.

But writing is not a sprint—it's a marathon. It took me five years, interspersed with moments of doubt and euphoria, to complete the first three novels. Along the way, I didn't just write; I evolved my craft, learned the intricacies of storytelling, and plunging into the vast ocean of self-publishing.

And just when the universe of **Dark Nebula** started to feel comfortably familiar, a new itch emerged—the urge to build anew. Thus, armed with a journal bursting with ideas, the **Portalverse** came alive—a thrilling merger of techno-thriller science fiction with rich elements of mythology, echoing the dual nature of my life as an engineer by day, dreamer by night.

Each book I pen is an ode to my younger self and every reader who yearns for a future brimming with marvels, enigmas, and unimaginable adventures. **Drowning Earth**, this tapestry of innovation and inspiration, is my gift to you—a respite from reality, a plunge into a universe that challenges and delights.

As you close the last page, my fervent hope is that this journey ignited the same passion and wonder in you that has driven me all these years. Enjoy, dear reader, for we've only just begun.



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To my anchor and compass, my incredible wife Amy: your belief in me has been the wind beneath my wings. To Abigail, Bradley, and Zachary, my three radiant stars: you've been my constant sources of inspiration. It's in the laughter we share and the moments we create as a family that my characters find their depth and spirit.

Embarking on the journey of a self-published author meant stepping into roles I never anticipated. Yet with each new hat I donned, there was a comforting hand or a reassuring voice, reminding me I wasn't alone. Your patience, love, and understanding made the winding path smoother and the challenges surmountable.

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In the grand tapestry of this tale, each one of you is a thread, vital and irreplaceable. From the depths of my heart, thank you.

Following those, there exists another group of individuals without whom this dream would've remained just that—a dream. They're the brave souls who saw potential in this tale and became its earliest champions. The Kickstarter community, a collective of visionaries and believers, decided that this story deserved to be shared with the world.

Rear Admiral - The commanders above and below the tides, leading our underwater adventure:

- Auntie Tina
- Dana Hartweg
- Derek Honerlaw

Commodore - Guardians of the abyss, directing the *Bancroft* through the deepest challenges:

- Ralph V. Buck
- John O

Captain - Steering through schools of wonders, every dive a new discovery:

- Jason & Shanon Brown
- Jason Clark
- In loving memory of Basil Martin
- Your Friendly Neighbors

Lieutenant Commander - The pillars of our underwater expedition, ensuring we stay on course:

- Joshua McGinnis
- Erica McKinley

Sub-Lieutenant - The pulse of our vessel, illuminating the path in the darkest depths:

- MG Herron
- Brenda Hiatt
- John Idlor
- J A Mortimore
- João Portela
- Rari Rajesh
- James TD Smith

- Kate Sheeran Swed
- Hiram G. Wells
- Mary Widdison

Midshipman - The ever-watchful sentinels, keeping an eye out for dangers of the deep:

- Herschel Blackburn
- Merrie Destefano
- Dead Fishie
- Peter J. Foote
- C. Gockel
- Patrick Hay
- Christian “Mecki” Hejl
- Antony Jordan
- Heiko Koenig
- Meenaz Lodhi
- Christian Meyer
- AM Scott
- Eric Sinclair
- Dave Walsh

Each name here represents a beacon of hope and belief in my work, and I am eternally grateful for your trust and support.